

BOOK REVIEW FOR *STUDIES IN EUROPEAN CINEMA*

Book Reviewed: Rogowski, Christian (ed.). *The Many Faces of Weimar Cinema: Rediscovering Germany's Filmic Legacy*. New York: Camden House, 2010. 354 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 978-1-57113-429-5 (hard cover), £55.00

This volume edited by Christian Rogowski presents a diverse range of fascinating articles by a panel of eighteen accomplished international scholars working in the field today. Presented in chronological order of the films discussed, a particular strength of this collection is not only its focus on lesser-known filmic texts from the Weimar period (1919-1933), but also its refreshing approach to the overall canon – which is largely still dominated by the critical perspectives of Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner. In his introduction, Rogowski puts forward the notion that Weimar cinema reaches far beyond a mere association with Expressionism and auteur cinema to include such diverse genres as *Kulturfilme* (cultural films), *Aufklärungsfilme* (enlightenment films), historical costume dramas, experimental film, exotic fairytales, war films, comedies and other commercially driven productions aimed at placing Germany at the forefront of the post-war European market. Highlighting film's popularity within German society as a whole, Rogowski stresses the book's intention to problematise the tendency to view 'popular genre films as aesthetically weak and politically suspect' (5).

In this regard, *The Many Faces* specifically questions the disdain with which both Kracauer and Eisner dismiss the social function of commercially driven popular cinema. Additionally, the editor is to be agreed with when he states that it is surprising that these critics ignore the Jewish heritage of a large number of significant Weimar practitioners. Jill Suzanne Smith's opening article immediately draws attention to this dimension by discussing marketing strategies and narrative formulae employed by the Austrian born Jewish filmmaker Richard Oswald. By focusing on the film *Sumurun* (1920), Richard W. McCormick similarly draws attention to the Jewish origin of the much overlooked filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch and how his sympathetic, yet seemingly 'ahistorical' and 'apolitical' approach, is 'not unrelated to his own background as a German Jew' (68). Though recognising that some questions remain unresolved, Cynthia Walk continues to consider the enlightening potential of Weimar assimilation films in challenging discrimination against (94) the East European Jews in films such as *Der Ritualmord* (Ritual Murder, 1919), *Das alte Gesetz* (Ancient Law, 1923) and *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (The City without Jews, 1924).

The social dimension of Weimar cinema is further accentuated in terms of films that seek to artistically represent the complexity of post-war sexuality. On the one hand, this is achieved by considering a new masculinity troubled by the trauma of the First World War and Germanic homophobia. The detailed analysis of Robert Reinert's *Nerven* (1919) offered by Barbara Hales notably draws attention to the medical understanding of war neurosis in returning soldiers as a psychological illness that threatened to destabilise the very fabric of Weimar society. Additionally, the complexity of the body-mind dichotomy within the male post-war experience strikingly comes to the fore in Anjeana Hans's revealing article on *Orlacs Hände* (The Hands of Orlac, 1924). Here, Hans specifically discusses the hands of Orlac as signifiers of somatic wounds suffered by a trauma-stricken male population. Elizabeth Otto further considers the star persona of Conrad Veidt in terms of his body's representational quality as a masculinised as well as feminised object of desire and pity.

On the other hand, post-war sexuality is also approached in terms of the threat presented by a new female sexuality. This aspect is particularly evident in Valerie Weinstein's deliberation on *Alaune* (Henrik Galeen, 1927) – a film that positions female sexuality as monstrous and almost masculine in its aggression. On a different note, the concept of the vamp is deconstructed in the romantic comedies of Hanns Schwarz, E. W. Emo and Karl Hartl. Through a consideration of their films, Mihaela Petrescu draws attention to their remarkable singularity in that they 'subject the stereotypical image of the vamp to rational scrutiny by employing humor, irony, satire, and ridicule' (311).

Additionally, this collection places considerable emphasis on Weimar cinema's intention to consciously place itself in opposition to the dominating American market of the post-war years. This is achieved by considering Weimar cinema's economic contribution as both a national and an international form of entertainment. Veronika Fuechtner notably highlights the transnational dimension of this notion in her article entitled 'The International Project of National(ist) Film: Franz Osten in India', while Chris Wahl reflects on the impact Germany's multi-lingual sound versions had on the international and European markets. The reader is also invited by Ofer Ashkenazi to move away from Kracauer's view on Weimar cinema's use of sound as an escapist spectacle, in favour of a view that sees it as a creative technique to communicate a post-war sense of loss.

As can be traced throughout almost every essay, the most significant contribution of this collection is its focus on the socio-political role of Weimar cinema within a post-war European context. Far from simply being dominated by expressionist codes and conventions, the Weimar period is a social movement advocating change in an economically unstable society where the memory of war is still fresh. In this regard, Jaimey Fisher judges the use of sound to impact heavily on the development of realist anti-war films such as G. W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918*. Additionally, in a close analysis of Wilhelm Dieterle's impressive film *Geschlecht in Fesseln* (Sex in Chains, 1928), Rogowski's own article reflects on human rights and the social function of Weimar cinema by simultaneously problematising German society's reluctance to prison reform and its discriminatory view on same-sex relationships. Finally, Nancy P. Nenno undermines both the merits of war and a nationalist view of Weimar cinema by drawing attention to the cinema space as a site of humanity. By means of Victor Trivas's 1931 film *Niemandland*, Nenno offers an example of a Weimar film that represents 'a larger cultural, political, and economic Western European community' (295).

Enhanced by a series of sixty-one illustrations and a filmography that provides useful information as to the availability of each film discussed, this book will be a valuable addition to Weimar Cinema studies. The articulate and narrative style of each essay would be highly suitable for undergraduate students. The book will also prove most informative to scholars who wish to move beyond a superficial study of the period. Due to the discovery of lost or unknown Weimar films in recent years and the release of digitally remastered versions on DVD, there is no doubt that this book will find a prominent place within the canon.

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