

Klaus Kreimeier. *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918-1945.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. 451 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9483-7.



Reviewed by Margaret McCarthy (Davidson College)

Published on H-German (May, 1997)

Seldom does one come across historical research of the astonishing scope and breadth evident in Klaus Kreimeier's *The Ufa Story*. Wonderfully lucid prose and short, readable chapters document not only the entire life-span of the *Universum-Film AG*, but also delve into fascinating topics like "Ufa and the Intellectuals," "Bacchic Chaos: Consumerism, Eroticism, and Cinema in the Nazi State," and "Architecture, Film, and Death." Kreimeier's solid, smart analyses rest on an extensive knowledge of both German film history and the larger historical frame, and the wealth of detail he provides powerfully demonstrates how Ufa became "part and parcel of German dreams and nightmares in the first half of this century" (p. 3). Central to this two-fold role is the internal contradiction that characterized Ufa's mission throughout its existence: to cater to the yearnings of the masses, while always preparing "to submit to rules bred of lies and self-deception" (p. 9), i.e., the demands of a State or other reactionary forces that often dictated the terms of representation. At the same time, Ufa also embodied the dual impulse that early in the century came to characterize the film industry as a whole: the need to produce both mindless, "tasteless" films in response to popular demand, yet also, looking towards the cultural and aesthetic needs of the bourgeoisie, to develop the art film and literary adaption. Again, both directions often fell prey to propagandistic uses, particularly when

cleverly packaged in the "opulent trimmings" of comedy and drama. Throughout its history, a wide abyss in fact remained between Ufa's "serious films"—tragedies rife with German obsessions of "death, destruction, and self-destruction"—and products at the other end of the filmic spectrum, characterized by "trash and intrigue, whores and crooks, humor and mad pranks" (p. 22).

The "birth certificate" of Ufa was issued on 4 July 1917 in the form of a letter written by Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff about the need to put film to work to ensure the successful completion of the war. A firm believer in the power of propaganda as a weapon of war, Ludendorff encouraged the state to purchase the majority of stock in the Danish film company Nordisk as well as other existing German film companies. Thus the political, economic, and military elite conjured out of nothing a "cultural production company of historically unprecedented magnitude" (p. 25) that could potentially establish control over large portions of the European film market while furthering German propaganda in the interests of the Reich government. What emerged, according to Heinrich Fraenkel, was a "vertically organized firm with millions at its disposal, with its own production and distribution, its own theater chain, and, most important, its own branches and theaters in neutral foreign countries" (p. 32).

Ufa's plush and gilded theater foyers with crystal chandeliers not only afforded working-class audiences symbolic entry into "better circles." The films themselves offered "a chance to live entirely by and for oneself, entirely outside the everyday world, to be drawn into the illuminated surface of the screen and 'disappear' in it, to venture into a realm of experience lost to everyday consciousness, to enter another dimension of world and reality" (p. 36). So strong was this spell that during a special pre-release screening of Ernst Lubitsch's *Gypsy Blood* on 8 November 1918, as revolution broke out in Berlin and Spartacists and government troops took up arms, no one in the audience seemed to react to the approaching rifle fire and greeted the film's conclusion with enthusiastic applause. Such opulent premieres as an important slice of Berlin life, Kreimeier argues, gave Berliners their equanimity and armed them against the impositions of history. On a more basic level, urban and rural theaters provided many unemployed and homeless people an emergency shelter, place to sleep, or simply the opportunity to warm themselves.

Producing both "reactionary" and "revolutionary" films, Ufa in the early 1920s, however, was not yet in the grip of political reaction. On the sets of Ufa's massive Neubabelsberg and Tempelhof studios, "they construct whole cultures and destroy them again," (p. 100) Siegfried Kracauer observed. More dangerously, Ufa's studios became, according to Ernst Bloch, a "melting pot" for Weimar and its progressive and regressive tendencies; eventually they proved defenseless against the forces that ushered in new meanings in the form of a "false religion." Indeed, as Kracauer observed, the final scene of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*—where the workers fall to their knees before the ruler's cathedral—already symbolically anticipated the totalitarian rule to come.

Restructured and saved from financial ruin by Privy Councilor and media magnate Dr. Alfred Hugenberg and his lieutenant Ludwig Klitsch, Ufa began to exhibit a distinctly nationalistic profile, and a dictatorial style emerged that privileged reactionary film projects. Its new politicization was particularly evident in the production of newsreels as propaganda weapons, a technique later energetically cultivated and systematized by Joseph Goebbels. Ufa's melodramas, comedies, Prussian films, waltz dreams, and barracks comedies captured the imagination of the people as leftist productions were unable to do, and by infusing such productions with reactionary forces, Ufa paved the way for the victory of National Socialism. In fact, as Kreimeier argues, Ufa's revue and operetta films served to orchestrate and illuminate the

"death throes and demise of Germany's first democracy" (p. 186).

Placed under the auspices of the Reich Film Guild during National Socialism, Ufa became subject to a seamless process of pre-censorship that followed films through every step of production, from draft manuscript to the editing table. Eventually Goebbels had himself appointed senior censor with unlimited powers on banning and/or altering films. The result: "Consumerism and the glorification of technology, enthusiasm for sports and a longing for self-realization, a desire for adventure and the cult of 'dashing masculinity'—all these blended together under the sign of the swastika" (p. 239). Beneath the surface of sentimental plots, glittering sets, and care-free waltzes, Kreimeier identifies on the one hand a renunciation of drives and a reification of the body, and on the other "aggression advancing remorselessly in the rhythms of production and war" (p. 240). Particularly problematic was National Socialism's all-out effort to do away with eroticism in the name of reactionary plots and middle-class morality, a move which inhibited their films' appeal.

More successful, however, were National Socialism's attempts to harness cinematic modes of representation to its own project of self-representation: "Fascism as an aesthetic strategy transformed reality into theatrical and film images" (p. 249). Of course, Kreimeier echoes arguments here already made by other scholars. The ultimate effect, according to Walter Benjamin, was that Nazi subjects could "experience their own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure" (p. 249). Ironically, Hitler's own films tastes were in "crass contrast" to the reigning National Socialist aesthetic. Before the war began, hardly an evening passed when Hitler did not watch a few newsreels and one or two feature films, apparently of the mediocre variety of love and society films. Epics and revues—especially if the latter displayed many bare legs—as well as banned foreign films were among his favorites. A basic desire to ban reality from history and put illusion in its place was what prompted the final, infamous Ufa production: Veit Harlan's *Kohlberg*, which called upon the armed forces for 185,000 soldiers as extras, plus 4,000 sailors, and 6,000 horses in the final, disastrous days of the war, all in the name of cultivating the illusion of Germany's ultimate victory. Ufa's demise soon followed the war's end, as Allied and Soviet forces began dismantling its administration and production facilities.

Missing from this impressive book is an overarching thesis that, like Siegfried Kracauer's construction of

Weimar cinema in terms of castrated male subjectivity, might have ensured Kreimeier's work a permanent place in the landscape of German film scholarship. References to the vast range of recent theoretical scholarship on German film during the Ufa era are spotty, and there are virtually no references to American scholars of German film. Even Kracauer and Lotte Eisner receive at most obligatory nods. Missing as well is an in-depth analysis of the films cited, which are often reeled off in laundry list fashion, as is the case with actors' and other relevant players' names.

This reader sometimes found herself bogged down and bored by the minutiae of detail. Perhaps a work of primarily historical research cannot be expected to provide in-depth cultural analysis or, alternatively, to review the entire field of already-existing scholarship.

For pedagogical and/or research purposes, Kreimeier's achievement would probably work best in conjunction with scholarly work that does, in fact, delve deeper into the cultural meanings of the films he cites, and such work exists at this point, of course, in abundance. Ultimately, Kreimeier has done us a tremendous service in providing such a comprehensive, smart, and readable history of Germany's greatest film company.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU. All H-German Book and Article Reviews are posted at the H-German WWW Site. Go to <http://h-net2.msu.edu/~{}german/>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Margaret McCarthy. Review of Kreimeier, Klaus, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1006>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.