



Christiane Fritsche. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung im Fernsehen: Westdeutsche Filme über den Nationalsozialismus in den 1950er und 60er Jahren.* München: Martin Meidenbauer Verlag, 2003. 232 S. EUR 35.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89975-031-7.



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Books about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in a variety of media are being published at a rate that one easily loses count. Among these it is fortunate to find Fritsche's book, which relies on archival research and historical documentation to explore the relationship of Germans in the 1950s and 1960s to the Third Reich. Fritsche is interested in documenting the genesis of three films about the Third Reich that were produced in Germany and shown on West German television between 1955 and 1969. She not only asks about the concrete conditions of the production and the "purpose of its makers" (p. 15), but delves deeply into the technical and artistic construction of the films. Further, she aims to analyze the reaction of the public media to these films and relate this to the insights of scholarship on the Third Reich current in Germany at the time. Fritsche's concern is to understand whether television influences public opinion or merely mirrors the current social climate.

This book started life as an MA thesis. The films discussed are the drama *In jenen Tagen* (Helmut Käutner), the 14-part documentary *Das Dritte Reich* (Süddeutscher Rundfunk and Nord- und Westdeutscher Rundfunkverband), and the documentary *Adolf Hitler–Versuch eines Portraits* (Joachim Fest). The discussion of the films is embedded in a description of the wider social context of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In

jenen Tagen, shown in cinemas already in 1947, provides some continuity for the first two chapters, having been screened on television in 1955. The material for the analysis of the films is supplied both from archives and from discussion of the films' reception in the press. Thus the four main chapters follow the same pattern, moving from the social background of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to a general discussion of the role of television in society, to a detailed discussion of the content and technical makeup of the films. Each chapter closes with observations about the reception of the film in the press and an analysis of the relationship between the films and contemporary research about National Socialism.

While the title of the book suggests an analysis of films screened on television in the 1950s and 1960s, the focus is clearly on the 1950s, with two chapters devoted to that decade. To the reader's detriment, no rationale is given for the choice of these three particular films. The mixing of drama and documentary complicates the discussion and it may have been preferable to remain within one genre. Fritsche's analysis of the production and reception of the films discussed is detailed, but on the whole confirms already well-documented scholarly insights about the different periods of postwar West German public interpretations of National Socialism. She arrives at the now somewhat conventional conclusion

that “Ein Film über das Dritte Reich kann daher nur dann ein breites Publikum erreichen, wenn er Themen aufgreift, die in der Öffentlichkeit ohnehin präsent sind, und wenn er Thesen vermittelt, die die Mehrheit des Publikums teilen. Das Fernsehen wirkt damit verstärkend, es spiegelt meist das Bild vom Nationalsozialismus wider, das in der Bevölkerung dominiert” (pp. 182f.).

The extensive narration of public debates about National Socialism in German society at the time of the films’ screenings adds little in terms of analysis or insight and could have been easily omitted from the publication. While it is essential that this presentation was part of the

MA thesis, its inclusion in the book stands in the way of the reader’s attention to the detail of the author’s interpretation and the public reception of the films. West German debates about National Socialism are well documented. Readers of such a specialized book will generally have considerable knowledge of these debates and will find much here that is an unnecessary distraction.

Fritsche meticulously documents the history of the making and reception of each of the films she discusses. This is the main merit of the book and those interested in the history of film and television and in the technical advances made at the time in the medium of film will benefit from Fritsche’s presentation.

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