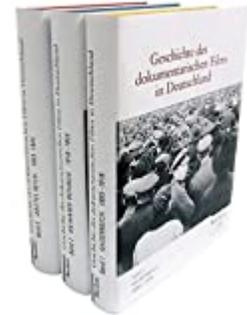




Peter Zimmermann, Kay Hoffmann. *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland: Band 3: "Drittes Reich" (1933-1945)*. Ditzingen: Reclam, 2005. 2120 S. in 3 Bd.; 700 schw.-w. Ill. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-15-030031-2.



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The Definitive Work on the Subject

This work is a must-read for everyone interested in German film, the history of mass media and the history of modern Germany. This three-part history of documentary film in Germany is a monumental undertaking and a remarkable accomplishment. It is based on several thousand films and other archival materials, committed to the highest standards of film scholarship and historical analysis, attentive to the changing forms, meanings and functions of the non-narrative tradition and intensely aware of the attendant issues of historiography, archiving and preservation. Carried out under the general editorship of Peter Zimmermann of the Haus des Dokumentarfilms in Stuttgart and completed with the support of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the three volumes focus on the history of German documentary film from 1895 to 1945. The result is a comprehensive overview of the documentary form that follows its diverse manifestations across different historical periods, technological eras and aesthetic traditions and shows the importance of documentary as a visual memory of the first half of the twentieth century.

The conception and organization of the individual

volumes attest to the centrality of politics to the development of non-narrative forms by tracing their functions in different institutional contexts, from education, science and religion to the military-industrial complex, modern consumer culture and the tourist and entertainment industry. Within a general chronology that traces the gradual marginalization and increased specialization of documentary genres, the individual contributions identify a number of recurring themes: the key role of the documentary tradition in the making of Weimar mass culture and modernity and the imaginary mapping of nation in the changing topographies not only of urbanism, colonialism and militarism but also of scientific discovery, technological progress, and the modern workplace. Several theoretical contributions place the documentary within by now familiar accounts of Weimar's progressive mass culture and the ideological commitments of fascist modernism. Based on archival research, other contributions present forgotten film production companies and film technologies and confirm the importance of documentary filmmaking to the establishment of film as a business and an industry.

Needless to say, with a work of more than two thousand pages and more than fifty authors, it makes no sense to focus on individual contributions. However, it is possible to highlight a number of important points. First, the three-volume history draws attention to the changing meaning of the documentary form within different artistic traditions, social practices and political and institutional contexts. The overlap with other discourses of entertainment, education, information and manipulation is confirmed by the wide range of genres discussed: newsreels, actualities, nature films, city films, expedition films, colonial films, travel films, artist films, sport films, instructional films, advertising films and, last but not least, the many highly politicized forms (such as war newsreels, colonial films and Nazi party films) that have contributed to the frequent identification of non-narrative forms with political propaganda. Second, the numerous case studies confirm the centrality of the documentary tradition to the project of mass culture and modernity, a key factor in the mobilization of the masses and the medialization of experience. The first volume on Wilhelmine cinema in particular reveals non-narrative genres as a driving force behind the development of new film technologies, formal conventions, exhibition practices and institutional frameworks. Likewise, the many overlaps between the second and third volumes draw attention to continuities in the modernist imagination (for example, in the cult of the machine or the celebration of labor) before and after 1933. Third, the editors and authors force us to rethink questions of authorship, film form and film style in the larger context of national cinema, national identity and nationalist ideologies. They do so by providing several longer sections on the most influ-

ential representatives of the German documentary tradition, including Arnold Fanck for the mountain film, Hans CÅ¼rliss for the artist film, Walter Ruttmann for the city symphony and Leni Riefenstahl for the propaganda film. A similar effect is achieved through the thematic focus on the cultural film as a uniquely German genre with a strong investment in film as a medium of information, education and indoctrination.

Documentary films have played only a subordinate role in the emergence of German film studies as a scholarly subject and academic discipline. As a consequence, the history of film has been dominated by the formal conventions of genre cinema and its implicit assumptions about film form and spectatorship. In offering an alternative account, this three-volume set forces us to rethink the entire configuration of narrative and non-narrative film, drawing attention to the beginnings of documentary as a popular entertainment, the importance of non-narrative forms as an integral part of film programming and the contribution of the cultural film to the development of film as a modern industry and media technology. In light of the ground-breaking nature of this comprehensive overview, it is all the more regrettable that most of the films discussed will remain inaccessible to film audiences, hidden in the archives and ignored by retrospectives. Here the reclamation of documentary as an integral part of film history would be greatly helped by the publication of a DVD box set with a sample of films that could be used in conjunction with the books. The growing interest in non-narrative forms would also be nurtured by the continuation of this project into the postwar years and the very different configurations of documentary in the age of television and other digital media.

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