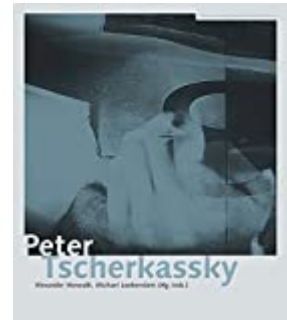


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Alexander Horwath, Michael Loebenstein, eds.** *Peter Tscherkassky*. Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum/SYNEMA Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2005. 254 pp. EUR 18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-901644-16-0.



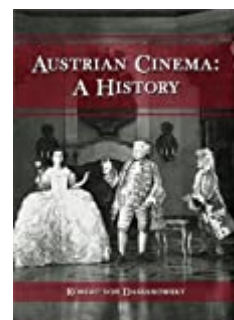
**Michael Omasta, Olaf Möller, eds.** *John Cook: Viennese by Choice, Filmmacher von Beruf*. Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum/SYNEMA Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2006. 200 pp. EUR 18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-901644-17-7.



**Thomas Tode, Barbara Wurm, the Austrian Film Museum, eds.** *Dziga Vertov: Die Vertov-Sammlung im Österreichischen Filmmuseum/The Vertov Collection at the Austrian Film Museum*. Second edition. Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum/SYNEMA Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2007. 288 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-901644-19-1.



**Robert von Dassanowsky.** *Austrian Cinema: A History*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2005. 328 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-2078-0.



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**Published on** H-German (October, 2007)

### **Cinema Studies from Austria: Staging New Visions of Cinema from Central**

Cinema studies in, on, and from Austria are blooming right now, opening out heretofore more restricted visions of the cinemas that matter in Europe and the Slavic states. This review reflects my pleasure in introducing a major film museum, the Austrian Film Museum, (<http://www.filmmuseum.at/>) and its publication series, and then an English-language history of Austrian cinema that will engage film buffs and scholars alike.

The Austrian Film Museum follows in the pattern of major European film archives and libraries, combining archives, exhibition space, and public outreach through lectures and film showings. Its collections embrace the broad definition of film documentation, including projection technology, with collections of all types of film and media materials (especially historical documentation, including propaganda films and newsreels, advertising, and all sorts of independent film). It also has a noteworthy focus on transnational film production by emigrants from central and eastern Europe and Soviet film from 1918 to 1945. The museum was founded by Peter Konlechner and Peter Kubelka, who have been collecting since 1964, assembling over 20,000 films from Thomas Edison in 1893 up to the present, including Austrian films by Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Valie Export, Virgil Widrich, Lisl Ponger, and Peter Tscherkassky. The museum is doing film restorations and DVD issues, as it is collecting actively (Michael Haneke's working papers are there).

The three volumes reviewed here are fine representatives of the museum's publishing program (the books are distributed in the United Kingdom by Wallflower Press and through them in the United States by Columbia University Press). They represent the best in museum catalog work that one can find internationally: copiously illustrated and well documented, they include detailed bibliographies and filmographies (themselves illustrated with stills), and are aimed at making these films and their makers accessible to a general readership as they provide whatever is needed for professional study.

The first is on the films of Peter Tscherkassky (b. 1958), which have been part of recent international interest in avant-garde film. He has used many media (including Super-8 film) and intellectual inspirations (psychoanalysis, semiotics). This book/catalog includes a great deal of visual documentation and essays about and by Tscherkassky (an autobiographical essay; all the essays are presented in English and German). The book is complemented by a biographical timeline, a filmography with stills and a brief description of each project, and an extensive bibliography. This claims to be the first book ever published on Tscherkassky; given its ample visual materials, it eminently serves the purpose of introducing this interesting international voice for experimentation.

The second volume is on Canadian-born filmmaker and photographer John Cook (1935-2001), a key figure in the "Austrian New Wave" of the 1970s. His work falls in the tradition of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, as representing an *auteur*-driven cinema. The book's first part (in German) has one essay on his films, one on his writings, and a set of interviews, followed by a biography and filmography (each with stills and information on the project), along with some reviews. A previously unpublished autobiography ("The Life," pp. 121-151) fills the second half of the volume, documenting Cook's travels from his childhood in Toronto, 1960s Paris (as a photographer; photos from his estate are included here), and his second career as a filmmaker in 1970s Vienna.

Russian filmmaker and film theorist Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) is the subject of the third volume, presented here in an extensive and exemplary survey of the museum's Vertov Collection (the largest of this filmmaker's work outside Russia), including reproductions of film stills, photographs, posters, letters, and sketches. It includes his autobiographical "Calling Card" (1947) in English. Essays and all commentaries are included in English and German, and the catalog entries encompass artifacts in all categories, many with reproductions. This

volume will stand as an irreplaceable resource on all facets of the filmmaker's production.

Readers are encouraged to review the rest of this series: the books are produced to the highest scholarly standards, and they are readable and reasonably priced. Put the Austrian Film Museum on the list of significant forces in film history, next to the Paris Forum des Images/Vid  oth  que de Paris and the British Film Institute—younger but no less emphatic about its mission. Note, too, that its partner in these publications, SYNEMA Gesellschaft f  r Film und Medien (<http://www.synema.at/>), is part of a very distinct film scene in Austria, loosely associated with the Diagonale film festival (<http://www.diagonale.at/>), which was founded in 1997 to resist conservative politics and is currently held in Graz as a counterpart to the more internationally oriented Viennale (<http://www.viennale.at/>).

The other book discussed here, *Austrian Cinema: A History*, comes from a very different sensibility and tradition of history-writing, but deserves special note as the first extensive exposition of a distinct filmmaking tradition in English—a book sure to spur further research on all facets of the film industry. Robert von Dassanowsky comes to his project over several routes. One is practical and scholarly: he has credentials as a media writer, producer, actor, editor, founding president of a local PEN chapter, and vice president of the Austrian American Film Association (AAFA); he is also an academic—professor of German and film studies at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs). His second route is as a second-generation film producer, the son of Austrian musician and film studio founder Elfi von Dassanowsky (Belvedere Films). The third is as a dedicated historian of Austrian film and the Austrian film industry. He is therefore committed to putting all aspects of an oft-overlooked tradition back on the table for discussion in various scholarly contexts.

Dassanowsky's survey of the Austrian film industry from 1895 into the twenty-first century reflects these multiple perspectives. Its multidimensional narrative is organized chronologically, taking up film genres, major figures in front of and behind the camera (all fields—from composers through writers and cinematographers), producers, studios, and the major economic and political events influencing the production and distribution of films. Copiously illustrated and written in a clear, brisk voice, the book introduces an industry that has had little press in English, or which has all too often been sub-

sumed into "German" cinema.

This is *not* a book on "Austrian national cinema," as currently represented in debates by scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser, who consider cinema with respect to national identity and canon formation. Dassanowsky has not intended to write that kind of book, in no small part because Austria has (since its days as the Austro-Hungarian Empire) a multinational and multi-ethnic identity that resisted standard approaches to national identity. Its professionals often functioned in two or more languages, and its "national industry"—were it asserted to exist—included studios and distribution venues in Prague and Budapest, and drew on a cast of film professionals who worked internationally.

This book, then, does *not* theorize a national cinema, but rather assembles a broad panorama of moments in film history, including films produced or co-produced by Austrian companies—"a production created by a majority of Austrian talent, inside or outside the country" (p. 4), some   migr   cinema, and a number of films nationally and internationally identified as Austrian, even though they only treat Austrian materials (*The Sound of Music* [1965] is the most familiar of these, but Max Oph  ls's Schnitzler films, made in France, are also included). The volume does not try to exhaust any category of interest as a definitive reference work, but rather draws out chains of influence and employment to give a lively account of how a film industry works, in all its use of talent and opportunity. It also does the great service of avoiding too-simple distinctions between serious and entertainment films, just as it avoids hagiography. Copiously illustrated, it puts names on the table that are not necessarily known, as it sometimes violates chronology to highlight the importance of careers and talents diffused across several national production countries because of history, politics, and national origin. *Austrian Cinema* will entertain and inform many readers, giving them access to a seminal film industry.

This book is by no means perfect,[1] but it will serve its intended audience brilliantly, as a readable orientation to a *non*-national framing for the study of a cinema all too often dismissed or conflated with Germany's. As such, it is much more than a fan history, as it orients its readers to a specific film tradition in a voice which its practitioners would have recognized (not as film scholars might prefer to domesticate it). It will lead others to texts with other claims: most notably, on contemporary Austrian cinema in German, Elisabeth B  ttner and Christian Dewald's admirable two-volume comprehensive his-

tory of Austrian cinema (*Anschluß an Morgen* [1997] and *Das tägliche Brennen* [2002])[2] and Willy Riemer's *After Postmodernism* (2000). But for those readers (including students at all levels) who need an orientation to the themes, issues, and practitioners of central European cinemas, this volume will be an admirable starting point.

#### Notes

[1]. Despite its quality and interest, the book's reception has fallen into two camps, clearly marked by biases in scholarly ideology and discipline—I leave it to readers to decide which camp to side with. Austrian studies scholars praise it widely for its breadth of vision and its sensitivity to the relationship between the film industry and various kinds of politics; a 2006 review by Allyson Fiddler may stand for several others. At the same time, scholars implicated in the national cinema debates or with a vested interest in emphasizing German cinema without admitting the symbiosis between Austria and Germany in the arts consider the volume underthe-

orized. For example, Christian Cargnelli's 2006 review takes great pains to point out a number of relatively minor errors that I hope will be corrected in the next printing (misspelled names, odd translations of titles, slips in dates that might be documented differently in different sources). But more serious is Cargnelli's overall rejection, which rests on a fundamentally different notion of what constitutes research on film history. See Christian Cargnelli, "Review of *Austrian Cinema: A History*," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 26 (2006): 628-631; and Allyson Fiddler, "Review of *Austrian Cinema: A History*," *Austrian Studies* 14, no. 1 (October 1, 2006): 377-379.

[2]. Böttner and Dewald pride themselves on film history work outside what they consider the anecdotal, fan- or memoir-based history and oriented toward an Austrian self-understanding based on aesthetics, economics, politics, and ideological circumstance, if not a national identity.

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

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**Citation:** Katherine Arens. Review of Horwath, Alexander; Loebenstein, Michael, eds., *Peter Tscherkassky and Omasta, Michael; Möller, Olaf, eds., John Cook: Viennese by Choice, Filmemacher von Beruf* and Tode, Thomas; Wurm, Barbara; Museum, the Austrian Film, eds., *Dziga Vertov: Die Vertov-Sammlung im Österreichischen Filmmuseum/The Vertov Collection at the Austrian Film Museum* and von Dassanowsky, Robert, *Austrian Cinema: A History*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13795>

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