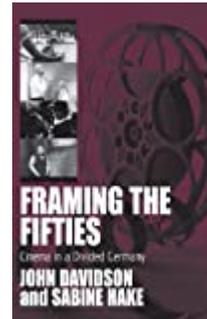




**John Davidson, Sabine Hake.** *Framing the Fifties: Cinema in a Divided Germany.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. VI, 250 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-204-9.



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## Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies

For a long time, German film studies suffered from a gaping hole between Weimar and the New Wave, yet few people seemed to notice this massive discontinuity. Scholars were mainly interested in the artistically rewarding works of the 1920s and the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Alexander Kluge, but not much else. If attention was paid to other periods, it usually was in order to talk about Nazi propaganda, narrowly defined; meanwhile, the “Golden Age” of Ufa and the genre films of the 1950s continued to dominate the afternoon timeslots on German and Austrian television. This disconnect between popular taste and art house scholarship went mostly unquestioned until the 1990s, when the academy re-discovered the popular cinema of the National Socialist period.

Now, we can witness a similar spate of studies of the movies of the 1950s (summarized helpfully in Sabine Hake’s introduction to the current volume) as the culture of the *Wirtschaftswunder* begins to be scrutinized. This new interest in the 1950s and kitschy genres like the *Heimatfilm* and the *Problemfilm* may be inspired, as Hake contends, by the arguably comparable “moment of na-

tional reconstruction and restoration” provided by unification, but the popular turn is probably also the next logical step given the absence of aesthetically significant trends in German film since the 1980s (p. 3). The popular is all we have now.

Fortunately, as this anthology demonstrates, popular cinema is a fruitful source for cultural studies approaches to German. To take Hake’s introductory comparison seriously, these essays convey a sense of national culture and character in transition. What is striking about the observations in this volume is how consistently the authors point to a new German identity—in both West and East—born out of postwar consumer power and eliding the immediate past. This mood is particularly well demonstrated by Johannes von Moltke’s analysis of the *Heimatfilm* and its cathartic representations of productivity and entrepreneurship. Von Moltke thus points his reader toward a counter-intuitive but convincing view of what seems, at first glance, to be a genre dedicated to a reactionary nostalgia for the “lost” Silesian territories. (His is the only essay, by the way, to attempt to follow Hake’s lead and suggest a connection between the 1950s

and the 1990s.)

Not surprisingly, variations on this theme of starting anew, and the challenges, repercussions, and fallacies of the attempts, are at the center of many of the essays. Jaimey Fisher discusses the new university and youth culture in relation to German guilt as represented in films produced by returning exiles Fritz Kortner and Gustav von Wangenheim. Barbara Mennel evaluates connections and disruptions between Fritz Lang's post-war India films, *Der Tiger von Eschnapur* (1959) and *Das indische Grabmal* (1959, and the director's Weimar legacy. Russel Lemmons traces the making of Kurt Maetzig's Ernst Thälmann bio-pics as reflections of the GDR's process of self-creation as the "better" Germany. As Angelica Fenner suggests, these filmic representations of the new and (sometimes) improved Germany seem to reach a strange climax in the racial and national fantasies projected upon an Afro-German child in Stemmlé's *Toxi* (1952).

While reevaluation of the German postwar experience constitutes the book's dominant theme, the breadth of the essays ensures that the reader's understanding of film in the 1950s goes beyond those questions. Also represented are articles on the documentary genre in both Germanies and their respective attempts to characterize each other (Matthias Steinle); Nazi-era director Helmut Käutner and his innovations in the detective genre (Yogini Joglekar); DEFA fairy tales read in light of burgeoning Cold War tensions (Marc Silberman); an Adorno-influenced listen to the sound track of *Das Mädchen Rosemarie* (1958) (Larson Powell); questions of agency and consumerism in the West German women's magazine, *Frau und Film* (Hester Baer); *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* (1958) and the contentious balance between German responsibility for the war and Germany's own suffering (Jennifer Kapczynski); multivalent actor Peter van Eyck and the complexities of concepts such as nation and masculine (Tim Bergfelder); the economics and structure of the postwar film industry (Knut Hickethier); and Austrian film as a regional rather than national category (Mary Wauchope).

The range of subjects covered makes *Framing the Fifties* a useful introduction to the early stages of postwar German film. As an anthology, it achieves a productive collective mix of historical context and film analysis, though one wishes that more individual pieces were as successful at striking such a balance. Kapczynski's essay is one of only a few to integrate discussion of film as a medium adequately with consideration of film as a cul-

tural/historical product and process. Similarly, the volume sometimes struggles to hit the right amount of depth as a whole. Some essays are minute in their focus (Mennel, Bergfelder, and Powell, for example) and have difficulty finding their place in this anthology. Other texts are mostly (though sometimes helpfully) broad overviews (Hickethier and Baer, in particular). Fenner's engaging study is muddled at times by abbreviated excursions into poststructuralism, while other entries could have benefited from a more pronounced theoretical apparatus (such as Steinle). Wauchope's otherwise interesting piece on Austria suffers from (inevitable?) second-class status in a volume dedicated to "German" film. One wonders how the desperate attempts of the Second Republic to distinguish itself from both Germanies during the 1950s could leave no noticeable impact on its film culture.

The essay on Austrian film, an appendage at the book's end, raises questions of editing and audience. The volume has the distinct feel of an assortment of essays rather than a cohesive study, as Hake herself acknowledges (p. 8). The semi-chronological placement of the texts does not promote a more complex understanding of the period. Why, for example, should Hickethier's summary of the economic conditions facing postwar film appear second to last when it is clearly an introductory text? One also misses a firmer editorial hand within several pieces; meaning is sometimes lost in poor phrasing or perhaps, translation, an inconsistent amount of plot summary or context, or when non-words like "irregardless" are allowed to find their way into an essay.

These organizational and potentially pedantic concerns are secondary, of course, to the larger questions that arise upon reading *Framing the Fifties*: how can/should a book like this connect to other studies of German film history (specifically) and cultural studies (generally)? The intention to do both seems present in the minds of the editors, from the mission statement of the series in which it is included, Film Europa, to Hake's introductory essay, and the otherwise unnecessary use of English translation for all quotations and film titles. And yet, I do not see this volume reaching an audience beyond German film studies or making explicit links to other periods of popular German cinema, though individual essays (Mennel's, for example) invite this larger discussion. That is not a criticism of this book but rather an acknowledgement of the continuing challenge of relevance for German Studies as a location of collaborative humanities/social sciences work. Even without these broader intra- and inter-disciplinary connections, scholars and students of German film will clearly be able to

refer to *Framing the Fifties* to gain a better understanding of popular culture, national identity, and this pivotal historical era.

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