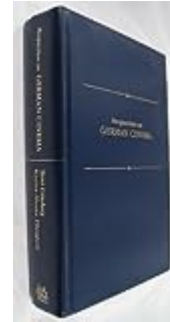


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Terri Ginsberg, Kirsten Moana Thompson, eds. *Perspectives on German Cinema*. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996. xii + 810 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8161-1611-9.



Reviewed by Scott Denham (Davidson College)

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This huge collection of forty-four essays will serve as a useful companion for teachers, graduate students, and some upper-level undergraduate students of German film. It is a compendium resource of mainly North American German film criticism, and in it students and scholars of German film will recognize many of the previously published essays—from Patrice Petro on Kracauer to Frederic Jameson on Syberberg to Andreas Huyssen on Lang to Stuart Liebman on Kluge. The editors have gathered the essays into ten “constellations” or groups of essays that treat a certain topic or theme: Heimat and the Historikerstreit, Jews in German cinema, or feminism and early Weimar, for example. I list all the essays below so prospective readers can see what a helpful collection of proven scholarly work on German cinema this edited volume is, since many of the essays are out of print or otherwise difficult to find. Of the forty-four essays gathered here, all but seven are reprinted from other sources. Most of the reprinted contributions still have much to offer and, with a few exceptions, the new essays commissioned for the volume also shed new light on German cinema studies.

Here then, is the list of all the essays, arranged by the editors in ten thematic “constellations”; I will discuss briefly below only those new for this volume:

A. “German Cinema Studies: Politics of Academic

Discourse”

*Tassilo Schneider (new for this volume), “Reading Against the Grain: German Cinema and Film Historiography” *John E. Davidson (new for this volume), “Hegemony and Cinematic Strategy” *Clay Steinman (1988), “Reception of Theory: Film/Television Studies and the Frankfurt School” *Patrice Petro (1991), “Kracauer’s Epistemological Shift”

B. “The *Heimat* Debate: Politics of History”

*Miriam Hansen, Karsten Witte, Thomas Elsaesser, and Gertrud Koch (1985), “Dossier on *Heimat*” *Eric L. Santner (1990), “On the Difficulty of Saying ‘We’: The Historians’ Debate and Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat*” *Anton Kaes (1992), “Holocaust and the End of History: Post-modern Historiography in Cinema” *Juergen Habermas (1993), “A Kind of Settlement of Damages: The Apologetic Tendencies in German History Writing”

C. “The Jewish Question: Politics of Subjectivity”

*Eric Rentschler (1985), “The Use and Abuse of Memory: New German Cinema and the Discourse of Bitburg” *Linda Schulte-Sasse (1988, revised 1996), “Courtier, Vampire, or Vermin? *Jew Suess*’s Contradictory Effort of Render the ‘Jew’ Other” *Gertrud Koch (1986), “Tortments of the Flesh, Coldness of the Spirit: Jewish Figures

in the Films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder" *Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Annette Van (new for this volume), "*Europa Europa: On the Borders of Vergangenheitsverdraengung and Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung*"

D. "The Euroamerican Question: Politics of Nation"

*Thomas Elsaesser (1982), "Lili Marleen: Fascism and the Film Industry" *Eric Rentschler (1984), "How American Is It: The U.S.A.'s Image and Imaginary in German Film" *Timothy Corrigan (1994), "Wenders's *Kings of the Road*: The Voyage from Desire to Language" *Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (1991), "The Cultural Politics of Intimacy-Biology and Ideology: The 'Natural' Family in *Paris, Texas*"

E. "Feminism, Motherhood and Terrorism: Politics of Gender"

*Susan E. Linville (new for this volume), "Self-Consuming Images: The Identity Politics of Jutte Brueckner's *Hunger Years*" *Barbara Hyams (1988), "Is the Apolitical Woman at Peace? A Reading of the *Fairy Take in Germany, Pale Mother*" *Antonia Lant (1988), "Incarcerated Space: The Repression of History in Von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*" *Mary Beth Haralovich (1990), "The Sexual Politics of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*" *Lisa DiCaprio (1984), "Marianne and Juliane/The German Sisters: Baader-Meinhof Fictionalized" *Jack Zipes (1977), "The Political Dimensions of *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*"

F. "Queer Constructs: Politics of Desire"

*Imke Lode (new for this volume), "Terrorism, Sodomasochism, and Utopia in Fassbinder's *The Third Generation*" *Patricia White (1987), "Madame X of the China Seas" *Roswitha Mueller (1985), "The Mirror and the Vamp" *Christopher Sharrett (1989), "The Last Stranger: *Querelle* and Cultural Simulation"

G. "Myth and Allegory: Politics of Utopia"

*Kaja Silverman (1983), "Helke Sander and the Will to Change" *Melanie Magisos (1980), "*Not Reconciled: The Destruction of Narrative Pleasure*" *Frederic Jameson (1990), "'In the Destructive Element Immerse': Hans-Juergen Syberberg and Cultural Revolution" *Kent Casper (new for this volume), "Herzog's Apocalypse as Eternal Return: The Circularity of *La Soufriere*"

H. "Feminism and Early Weimar: Politics of Distraction"

*Thomas Elsaesser (1987), "Cinema-The Irresponsi-

ble Signifier or 'The Gamble with History': Film Theory or Cinema Theory" *Miriam Hansen (1987), "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'" *Patrice Petro (1987), "Modernity and Mass Culture in Weimar: Contours of a Discourse on Sexuality in Early Theories of Perception and Representation" *Andreas Huyssen (1986), "The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*"

I. "The Return to History: Socialism, Communism, Fascism"

*Lynn Abrams (1990), "From Control to Commercialization: The Triumph of Mass Entertainment in German 1900-25?" *Ben Brewster (1976), "Brecht and the Film Industry" *David Welch (1981), "The Proletarian Cinema and the Weimar Republic" *Eric Rentschler (1990), "Mountains and Modernity: Relocating the *Bergfilm*" *Eric L. Santner (1992), "The Trouble With Hitler: Post-war German Aesthetics and the Legacy of Fascism"

J. "The Post-al Public Sphere: Politics of Ideology"

*Katie Trumpener (1989), "On the Road: Labor, Ethnicity and the New 'New German Cinema' in the Age of the Multinational" *Marc Silberman (1991), "Narrating Gender in the GDR: Hermann Zschoche's *Buergerchaft fuer ein Jahr* (1981)" *Stuart Liebmann (1988), "Why Kluge?" *Walter Benjamin (1930, trans. 1979), "Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essay War and Warrior, edited by Ernst Juenger."

In an introductory essay, "Radical Disorderliness at the Postnationalist Moment," the editors Ginsberg and Thompson attempt to make clear a fairly basic point about German cinema studies: that it, unlike other areas of interest within cinema studies, is mainly concerned with identity and that this fact makes German film studies different and therefore interesting. They say this in many words, most of which, unfortunately, make little sense. The essay is poorly written, difficult to understand, and frustrating to read. I find this unfortunate, since the collection they have put together has so many better things to offer than their own essay. In their words, "while German cinema studies has emerged onto the academic scene ostensibly as part of a larger scholarly discipline, its peculiar, even obsessive focus on the logics of its conceptual identity—the "German"—has rendered it distinct from most other areas of cinematic cultural inquiry, themselves more overtly concerned with interrogating the postidentitarian aspects of global social reality than with rearticulating identities along national-cultural lines" (p. 5). That is to say, Ger-

mans make films about being German and scholars of German film talk about what is German about German film—and, they insinuate, this is wrong. Ginsberg and Thompson don't seem to like German film very much, for they see it as reactionary and politically dangerous. And they argue that German cinema studies also lacks the proper sort of progressive attitude that Ginsberg and Thompson would like to see (they call this attitude “radical post-al disorderliness”). They see a contradiction between the methodological stance of German cinema studies and its “topics.” German cinema studies operates in “traditional frameworks” (bad), is “congruent with Eurocentrism” (bad), claims “nationalist certitudes” (bad) and supports “social hierarchies of traditional cultural theory” (very bad); it does not, they claim, adopt the “newer, disorderly tendencies of the post-al” (good) (p. 6). This “anti-postmodern tendency,” they claim, “has come to symptomize an apparent contradiction: namely, appropriative gestures toward postmodern theory have themselves become emblematic of that paradigm’s more troubling, even reactionary aspects” (p. 7). What this really means does not become clear, even after thorough study of their essay. German film studies (not German film, mind you) is reactionary because it’s not postmodern? But then when it tries to act postmodern, it’s still reactionary because its “appropriative gestures” demonstrate the same old Eurocentric, nationalist hierarchies? What is “that paradigm” they refer to above? Is it the “anti-postmodern tendency”? Or is it “postmodern theory”? Not both, I hope. Whatever.

Or whichever. Ginsberg and Thompson put together this anthology to correct this conservative flaw of German cinema studies. But are their anthologized authors supposed to represent all that’s bad or all that’s good about the field? Are these scholars—Hansen, Kaes, Santner, Koch, Huyssen, Petro, Trumpener, and the rest—doing what German cinema studies should not: that is, adopting “reactionary” Eurocentric, nationalist hierarchies? This seems to be the editors’ claim. Their essay is frustrating on two levels. First, their accusatory tone and facile, preachy moralism is tedious and simplistic. For them, anyone who does not subscribe to the relativism and essentially libertarian state of their social model—the Internet, it seems—is suspect and reactionary. And second, their writing is so imprecise, unclear, and indirect that it approaches academic self-parody. For those who need more proof of my latter claim I quote the following section at length. In it they try to explain why they put together this anthology:

The present anthology is an attempt to intervene

into the problematics of this contradiction [i.e. “appropriative gestures toward postmodern theory have themselves become emblematic of that paradigm’s more troubling, even reactionary aspects”] by calling into question the common theoretical assumptions undergirding and, in turn, sustaining it. Through its particular organizational structure, the anthology fosters an interrogation of the varied, often hesitant ways in which German cinema studies has tried to address, if not incorporate, the post-al. Keeping in mind German film theory’s nostalgic moorings in the idealist philosophical tradition, it contends that German cinema studies’ hesitancy toward postmodernism has encouraged a decidedly ambiguous interpellation of disorderliness, one whose tenuous participation in the postnational polis of the Internet bespeaks a contemporary Anglo-American crisis in the conceptualization of the ‘German’ and, in turn, of broader understandings of identity, nation, and the social. Put another way, it suggests that German cinema studies, in its persistent deference to philosophical tradition, evinces a neoauthoritarian tact [sic] that compels an uncanny (unheimlich) replication of discourses linked ideologically to both the problematics of present-day reaction (North American as well as European) as well as to one of the most tremulous upheavals of German history—the fall of Weimar and the rise of the Third Reich (p. 7).

Ginsberg and Thompson lose sight of their pronouns’ antecedents; their meaning gets lost in clumps of imprecise nouns and tangles of undefined jargon. The “radical post-al disorderliness” they claim is a kind of liberating social movement seems only to have infected their prose. What does finally come out of their essay is their interpretation of Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat*, which they see both as representative of recent German cinema and as a propagandistic piece of neonationalist pulp. “In view of its ideological disavowals, popular reception and auteurist presumptions, then, *Heimat* symptomizes much of what triggers the critical project of this anthology, reminding us of the need for a radical political mediation of the parameters of scholarly dialogue and debate over the significance of a national cinema still resistant to the questions of the material, the ideological and the collective, in a world now run along neoliberal, neophenomenological, neonationalist lines” (p. 14). First: there has already been healthy and useful debate about Reitz’s film. Second: their assumption that *Heimat* is synonymous with a national cinema is wrong and simplistic.

Finally, the fact that Ginsberg and Thompson—in what we must remind ourselves is an introductory essay to a collection on German film—cite among their hun-

dreds of references, only one in German. I get the impression that the editors are not really interested in exploring German film on its own terms, or perhaps even capable of this. An interesting personal footnote about a turf battle over German film between a German department and a film studies department indicates that their concerns with politics are not merely global, but also highly local. While many of their claims here are important to scholars of German history, culture, and society—the necessity that we always be able to criticize our own presuppositions and methods (that is, our politics)—their essay fails as an introduction to an otherwise useful volume.

In Tassilo Schneider's historical survey of German film criticism, on the other hand, we get a highly readable and useful portrayal of the evolution and current (as of 1993) state of German film studies in both the American academy and in Germany. He points out sensible reasons for the privileged place of New German Cinema in the German studies film canon, the dominant roles of Siegfried Kracauer and the Frankfurt School in the development of German film studies, the relative—until late—absence of topics of women and of sexuality in German film studies, and the simple erasure of the films of the fifties and sixties from the German film canon. Schneider accurately points out the monolithic nature of German film in the American academy: with few exceptions, all the course syllabi, all the critical surveys, all the film series treat pretty much the same works by the same directors. Appropriate, then, is his demand that we read German film studies against the grain, that is, that we ask questions of the canon of both films and film criticism and theory. His call to look beyond German versions of the European art film and auteurist cinema—to begin to examine, for example, popular postwar German film—is beginning to be answered already (see, for example, Heide Fehrenbach's excellent recent study) and this shows how apt it is.

John E. Davidson's essay, also new for this collection, contains interesting observations about how German identity gets formed and consumed in the films of the New German Cinema, as well as a closer look at Germanness portrayed especially pointedly in Wenders's *Paris, Texas*, Adlon's *Out of Rosenheim*, and Ottinger's *Johanna D'Arc von Mongolia*, though his very sensible observations are sometimes obscured by unnecessary jargon ("minoritized," "otherized"). Still, his piece is painstakingly researched and offers a wealth of information about both the practical and implicit politics of New German Cinema.

In the other new essays, which are less generalizing

and thus more successful, we find practical studies of specific works. Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Annete Van present a knowledgeable reception study and analysis of Holland's *Europa, Europa* [*Hitlerjunge Salomon*] in which they use the film's complicated and controversial history as a practical entry into a nuanced reading of this film and especially of its sexual politics. This piece will be highly relevant for students and teachers working with this film in courses on German film studies, on the Holocaust or the Third Reich, or on the *Historikerstreit*. Susan E. Linville analyzes the less well-known autobiographical film by Jutta Brueckner, *Hungerjahre—in einem reichen Land*, paying special attention to the trope of consumption as identity forming in the postwar German context. Her reading is careful, thoughtful, and clear as it brings out key psychological aspects of the film. For this reason and because she situates the film in its historical and social and gender contexts in sensible ways without extravagant claims about either its representativeness or its political power, this essay will be of value to students and scholars alike.

Imke Lode's solid essay on Fassbinder's *The Third Generation* uses psychoanalytic models to show the film's complicated "somasochistic aesthetics," that is, how it defines personal and political relations as "constantly shifting bonds of domination and submission within the network of power" (p. 415). She pays special attention to the sexual relationships in the film and demonstrates how Fassbinder has used them to help viewers imagine a social utopia, a better world, by seeing themselves as sites of social change. This study should help a rarely-screened film gain the prominence it deserves. The final new contribution is Kent Casper's brief, clear, and illuminating reading of Werner Herzog's *La Soufriere* in the context of his other work. He reviews Herzog's well-known apocalyptic, colonialist, and mythmaking tendencies and shows convincingly how this film about a predicted volcanic eruption on Guadeloupe in 1976 (though it did not occur) fits into a pattern of assigning meaning to catastrophe: for Herzog, "the present catastrophic situation is no different from daily life" (p. 531).

Given the number and breadth of the reprinted essays, the collection will be a useful resource for libraries, especially smaller undergraduate collections which do not have regular access to a broad range of film periodicals.

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