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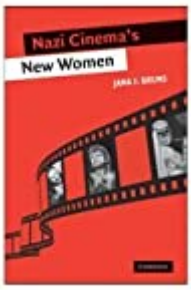

Jana Francesca Bruns. *Nazi Cinema's New Women.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xii + 271 pp. Illustrations, filmographies, bibliography, and index. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85685-0.

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Published on H-German (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

The Complexities of Creating and Using Female Film Stars during the Third Reich

Bruns's book represents an attempt to answer some of the major questions concerning the Third Reich's functioning and longevity. Following other scholars, the author focuses on the regime's use of culture, especially cinema, in an effort to explain the "double consciousness" that Germans lived in.[1] According to Bruns, one way such an illusion of normality could be sustained, while atrocities were committed, was the regime's skillful maneuvering between repression, incitement, and enticement. Exploring the three interconnected areas of film's institutional transformation under National Socialist rule, the ideological fabric of film texts and star images, and the "cultural work" performed by stars and movies off the screen, the author uncovers the paradoxically affirmative and disruptive roles played by the three most successful female film stars of the time: Marika RÃ¶kk, Zarah Leander, and Kristina SÃ¶derbaum. While such ambiguities mirrored National Socialism's own inherent tensions in regard to, for example, sexuality and eroticism, the place and role of women, as well as the role, function and form of cinematic productions, etc., they were also tolerated, if not created, by the Nazi regime in order to seduce and control the audience.

Bruns first sets the stage by tracing major changes in the film industry under National Socialist rule, and tells the now familiar story of film companies that, near bankruptcy in the early 1930s and often harboring nationalist feelings themselves, welcomed state intervention. The state quickly increased its control of the film industry, however, implementing wide-ranging administrative, economic, and legislative changes. The ultimate nationalization of the film industry in 1942 curtailed the autonomy of film companies and filmmakers, and led to the death of creative freedom. The first chapter thus focuses on the impact on individuals, especially film celebrities, who constituted a "cultural aristocracy" that enjoyed many privileges appropriate for this status, socially and politically. In this Faustian bargain, they played an important role as champions of a new National Socialist culture, and allowed the Nazi regime to reap large profits, boosting the Third Reich's war chest.

Wartime pressure eventually eroded the regime's lenient attitude towards some artists, unveiling its repressive character. While the focus on individual film professionals is illuminating in many aspects, providing numerous concrete examples of the repercussions of Nazi control, the fate of the majority of filmmakers who did not belong to this privileged circle remains unclear.

The rest of the book is devoted to the three stars, RÃ¶kk, Leander, and SÃ¶derbaum. In a chronological framework starting with the launching of their careers up to the end of the Third Reich, Burns details the production history of each of their films, pointing to governmental intrusions when appropriate; provides close readings of a handful of films, many for the first time; analyzes advertisement campaigns and reviews, comparing on- and off-screen personas; and tries to tackle the notoriously difficult issue of reception by looking at box office numbers, and, more often, using film studies theories to read into the films' possible receptions by the audience.

Bruns first studies Marika RÃ¶kk, the Hungarian artist who dominated the genre of the musicals. Famous more for her acrobatic performances than her dancing skills, RÃ¶kk has been berated in scholarship for her lack of talent, exemplifying the mediocrity of Third Reich revue films. But Burns convincingly demonstrates the complexity behind one of the most successful film stars of the time, offering the first detailed and complete analysis of the great majority of her movies. As with Leander, RÃ¶kk's career was launched in an attempt to fill the gap created by the exodus of talented filmmakers following the Nazi seizure of power. Promoted as a kind of child prodigy, her Hungarian nationality was not considered problematic, but was utilized to further the exoticism of her early films. Industrious, tenacious, and ambitious, RÃ¶kk worked tirelessly to compensate for her shortcomings, and positioned herself as the German Eleanor Powell. In the absence of any serious competition, she became the "Queen of Revue Films," starring in the first German color film, and remained one of the most popular actress until, and even after, the end of the war. Bruns successfully uses RÃ¶kk's career to illustrate the major tensions she seeks to underscore. "Wavering between transgression and conformity," the characters that RÃ¶kk embodied presented a complex image of a Third Reich New Woman who could keep house and be a good companion to the Third Reich's middle-class man and also dance seductively (p. 11). A seductive mixture of exoticism and familiarity, irreverence and acquiescence, such ideals of womanhood offered "domesticated" eroticism, appeasing unfulfilled and disaffected citizens.

RÃ¶kk's revue films were also at the center of many debates during the Third Reich, as the regime struggled to promote entertainment films that reflected its ideology. Some of RÃ¶kk's films were denounced as dazzling homage to American musicals, yet at the same time praised for offering a German alternative to Hollywood productions. After the outbreak of the war, Goebbels himself had to change his public appraisal of entertainment films. He had once criticized them for being frivolous in times of crisis, but he later declared them vital for strengthening popular morale and sustaining hope. The more desperate the military situation on the front, the more extravagant and lavish RÃ¶kk's films became, with blatant references to frowned-upon Hollywood and Weimar cinematic styles. While arguing that RÃ¶kk's films ultimately illustrated the regime's inability to prevent mass culture from departing even more from National Socialists' political goals, Bruns also concludes that her films "played a crucial role in compensating for material deficiencies and thus in sustaining the Third Reich" (p. 107).

Bruns then turns to Zarah Leander, the Swedish singer, who arguably became the biggest film star of the time, and certainly the highest-paid one. Hired to replace the actresses Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, iconic Germans lost to Hollywood, Leander benefited from her early collaboration with director Dietlev Sierk (later Douglas Sirk) and cameraman Frank Weihmayer. Together, Leander and these members of the filmmaking team constructed her melodramatic screen persona of the tragic heroine, characterized by melancholy, anguish, and tragedy, but also glamor and seductiveness. Artful camera work, and spirited music and lyrics contributed to the stories of fundamentally ethical women, whose sensuality was confined to a stage act, displaying and at the same time containing Leander's erotic energy. As with RÃ¶kk, the final images of female docility coexisted with numerous glamorous scenes that the audience could indulge in. Bruns shows how Leander's characters' excessive longings were enclosed in a narrative that denied their fulfillment by bringing back order and punishing transgressions, while simultaneously offering the audience a legitimized empathy with her characters.

Leander did not restrict such ambiguities to the screen. Advertising campaigns juxtaposed narratives of Leander's domestic life alongside her husband and children, with images of the superstar's lavish lifestyle and exotic glamour, making her even more attractive to viewers. Unfortunately, her image of morality, nobility, and authenticity, while extremely successful, restricted the

array of roles she could be convincing in, and explains some of her cinematic flops. Bruns demonstrates the active involvement of the regime in Leander's career and the many compromises it was willing to make in order to secure her collaboration. Her post-1939 films were meant to further the National Socialist agenda with stories that "transcended the private realm of family dramas by portraying personal relationships as an ideological battleground that was intimately linked with public and national causes" (p. 150). Rooted in the above-mentioned ambiguities of her screen persona, her performances of women who suffer and sacrifice themselves for personal reasons–not for a greater ideological cause like the *Volk*–led to the failure of many propagandistic messages in her films. Ultimately, Bruns argues, such ambiguities and complexities benefited the audience and turned Leander into "an unruly ally" of the Nazis. As Germany's domestic situation rapidly deteriorated, Leander went back to Sweden in the spring of 1943, much to the dismay of the audience and the government who lost their biggest star.

The third actress Bruns covers is Kristina SÃ¶derbaum, notorious for her marriage and collaboration with the director Veit Harlan. Harlan directed her in some of the most propagandistic films of the Third Reich, such as the 1940 anti-Semitic work "Jud SÃ¼Ã" and the *jusqu'au-boutist* film 1945 "Kolberg," but also in enormously popular melodramas such as "The Walk of Sacrifice" (1944). Through a detailed comparative analysis of "Jud SÃ¼Ã" and "The Immortal Heart" (1939), Bruns shows how politics and entertainment were closely interwoven in Harlan's films. Together, these films promoted a collective, rather than an individual, utopia, "a vision of a community resting on the principle of cultural and racial exclusiveness and superiority" (p. 196). Bruns unveils here again the ambiguity of SÃ¶derbaum's roles, which only superficially fit national socialist stereotypes. While SÃ¶derbaum portrayed dutiful Aryan women, SÃ¶derbaum's performances also offered youthful disobedience in narratives that eventually reaffirmed traditional gender roles and punished the heroines for their transgressions. Thus, as with RÃ¶kk and Leander, audiences were give plenty of opportunities to indulge in illusions of rebellion and dissidence, as well as to "derive a kind of sadistic pleasure from the character's vulnerability and loss of innocence" (p. 13).

Nazi Cinema's New Women provides a concise introduction to the history of the German film industry during the Third Reich and some of its female film stars. Although Bruns's use of film professionals' memoirs could have been a bit more cautious, Bruns's pledge to offer an "historical approach" is effectively concretized through an impressive array of primary sources, many utilized for the first time, and a systematic contextualization of the stars' films and careers. Rich in details and thoughtful analyses, the book successfully brings to light and explains numerous ambiguities and paradoxes of Nazi filmmaking in general and its actresses in general. Nonetheless, Bruns is occasionally unable to solve questions of agency, and cannot decide if ideological or commercial interests were responsible for the successes and/or failures of certain cinematic projects. Although German film scholars will be familiar with some of her points regarding Leander and SÃ¶derbaum, Bruns's detailed analysis of the creation of the on- and off-screen personas and the role of advertisement in the actresses' careers, as well as her inclusion of the understudied Marika RÃ¶kk, decisively further our understanding of the role of cinema, and its film stars, under the National Socialist regime.

Note

[1]. See, for example Eric Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Sabine Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). In addition to numerous articles, the last decade also saw the publication of two scholarly works dealing specifically with female film stars during the Third Reich, making the book jacket's statement that female stars constitute "an important but largely unexplored area" somehow misleading. See Antje Ascheid, *Hitler's Heroines. Stardom and Womanhood in Nazi Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); and Jo Fox, *Filming Women in the Third Reich* (New York: Berg, 2000).

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Citation: Christelle Le Faucheur. Review of Bruns, Jana Francesca, *Nazi Cinema's New Women.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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