



**Stephen Brockmann.** *A Critical History of German Film.* Rochester: Camden House, 2010. 532 pp. \$60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57113-468-4.



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## New, Young, and Unified: A History of German Cinema's Eras

Stephen Brockmann's history of German film is balanced by its grand and minor aims. On the one hand, there is the attempt to write in five hundred pages a widescreen history of film from Germany, a nation historically recognized as one of the world's leading cinematic producers. On the other hand, there is the apparently minor task of analyzing twenty-seven specific films. Brockmann analyzes each of these films, beginning with *The Student of Prague* (1913) and ending with *The Lives of Others* (2006), for its filmic qualities and its cinematic positioning. We get a good sense of academic and critical debates around each film, as well as the nuts-and-bolts of each film's story and style. The book lends itself to being a kind of reference work for dipping in and out of as needed. But if read from end to end, it also orients readers toward an excellent, representative selection of German films.

The big story of German national cinema has been told before and recently, so Brockmann positions his text in the book's introduction. He gives particular attention to Siegfried Kracauer's founding work and a recent

study by Sabine Hake.[1] But the banality of the academic jostling here can be put to one side by a glance at the contents page. It is here revealed how this book differs from what has come before: its handy division into separate essays on each film. Brockmann's book is arranged chronologically, broken down into eras which reflect the broader German situation rather than anything intrinsically filmic. Each of the eras—early German film, Weimar cinema, Nazi cinema, Zero Hour, East German cinema, West German cinema, reunified German cinema—is given a scene-setting introduction, before Brockmann moves on to analyze films he believes say something about the period. These introductions manage to, at once, narrate an historical overview of cultural and sociopolitical developments while also outlining some of the contentious critical, aesthetic debates of the era. At times, the book becomes a quasi-national history of Germany's twentieth century. Brockmann sets up these dominant thematics in the period introductions and then explicates further as they arise for each film. It is an enviable task to set out in fifteen pages the subtleties of, say, GDR cultural

policy, its fortunes under different leaders and the proxy squabbles pursued through it, while retaining a focus on the films produced. The novelty of Brockmann's book is, aside from its momentary up-to-dateness, the sheer usability of a book devoted to specific films. It also targets an intelligent but not especially buffish reader, one who might know something about Germany and/or cinema. It is equally, then, a guide for the perplexed, the dilettante and the expert.

Indeed, experts would be well advised to read Brockmann's section introductions, rather than skip them as material beneath their expertise. In one area of study (GDR and reunification cinema), the two relevant introductions were comprehensive and erudite. While some may dispute the benefit of establishing a canon of "must-see" (not Brockmann's term) German cinema, the introductions can be returned to after seeing the headline films, since Brockmann peppers these with references to other, equally important titles. Brockmann's handle on over a century of national film is impressive; nonetheless, the writing is always judicious, never suggesting mere name-dropping or cataloguing. To wit, I emerged from the book with a notepad sheet full of films to follow up. The expert can discover some canny links in the analysis.

Aside from canon formation, books such as this raise queries about the viability and arbitrariness of the national frame. Early on, Brockmann outlines his reasons for sticking with films or directors emanating from the German nation.[2] He admits, somewhat ruefully, that this immediately rules out the works of a director like Michael Haneke—although it also rules in New German Cinema mavericks like Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog, who have lived substantial portions of their lives in the United States. Movements like New German Cinema and Young German Cinema, with their clear national designations, ultimately make easier the job of bringing together different directors and outlining what they share; the overlapping historical experiences and birthplaces of Wenders, Herzog, Volker Schlöndorff, Margarethe von Trotta, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder cohere them in seemingly "natural" ways, despite their mature filmic tendencies varying widely.

Indeed, the chapter on Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) is a standout in the series of specific film discussions. Here Brockmann can cease laboring with the weight of Nazism and fascism. The films that form the canonical spine of the book all bear the impress of a society under sway of Nazism and fascism, as well as its aftereffects: it is there from *Metropolis* in 1927 up to

but excluding *Aguirre* in 1972 and the GDR's *Paul and Paula* in 1973.[3] So with *Aguirre*, one senses a relief in the writing: finally we can move away from *that* German history, or at least the kind of German history implicitly favored by the international film market, if not German cinema studies itself. Here, with Herzog, we come to some rather different topics of long-standing German interest: the sublime, romanticism, theology, the dialogue between nature and culture. Clearly, Herzog, for all his self-mythologizing, is not a man apart. He comes from, returns to, and lives out a relation to the Germany of his birth and of today. Nevertheless, in this chapter, we see, implicitly, how Nazism has come to occupy German cinema—and its academic study. The critical corpus leans on a cinema preoccupied with Nazism in both literal and allegorical forms, or its revenant presence in the agitations of the RAF. We see this too in the critical disdain for the yuppie (and "Wessi", i.e., from West Germany) comedies of the nineties: Modern German history fades away, hidden under the soft lamplight of *Rossini* (1997) or under the conjugal bed of sex comedies like *Maybe, Maybe Not* (1994). I tend to share such disdain and do not find much of worth in recent attempts by Paul Cooke and others to "recover" something from these films—except perhaps some textbook cases of psychoanalytic processes of displacement, repression, condensation, narcissism, etc. Nevertheless, these nineties films are worth covering, as Brockmann outlines, for their glaring self-absorption and their ignoring of the then recent fact of German unification.

Less deserving of space, it seems, are the films of the Nazi era, which get short shrift. Only one feature film (*The Great Love* [1942]) and one documentary (*Triumph of the Will* [1935]) are analyzed in depth. This approach, too, fits the critical orthodoxy of considering most Nazi-approved filmmaking as being beneath contempt: if it is worth seeing, it is only for its role as a historical curiosity, a theatre of the grotesque, a *Gruselkabinett* of Luftwaffe romance and sycophancy. Brockmann does stress, however, that the lack of material worth exploring here is not because it is full of raving anti-semitism—or at least not solely because of that. The reality of Nazi-era filmmaking, he insists, is that most of what was produced was soft-headed, averse to risks and overly cloying in its nationalistic appeals. It is, in other words, not compelling cinema; it is intellectually, aesthetically, and morally without merit. Brockmann's book is at its most nakedly canonical here: this is not a guide for the historian wishing to have an index of the films produced during the Nazi era. It is a guide to quality German cinema

for today's audiences.

Nevertheless, the years after World War II are more fruitful. There is a brief, illuminating section on Zero Hour cinema, including a discussion of *Murderers Among Us* (1946) as a representative yet exemplary rubble film. Brockmann also does an admirable job of discussing both East and West German cinema from 1949 to 1989. A decade ago, Thomas Elsaesser wrote that the history of cinema in Germany lacked a synthesized account of East and West German productions.[4] The ten years since his plea for such an account have seen various attempts to fill this lack. As in German history more broadly, the division of Germany in cinema history is now not so commonly replicated, by default, as a formal division in academic accounts. One chapter on the GDR and one chapter on the FRG is no longer the "common sense" route. The results have been some productive meetings between the history of the GDR and the FRG. Thomas Elsaesser set the example with the article in which he articulated this desire for a more edifying historical account. He analyzed the connections between Rainer Werner Fassbinder's bracing cinematic critiques of German history/society and, in the GDR, Konrad Wolf's "obsessive" zooming in on traumatic German history. Yet, as Elsaesser warned, the challenge is to resist the temptations of a "compare and contrast" or (a)symmetrical model, which smoothes away subtlety in order to produce a neat, pat analysis.

Brockmann does adhere to the model of keeping East and West German cinema apart, discussing them in separate chapters. But, importantly, the chapters are of roughly equal length: the outdated, Cold War notion that Communist film was mere propaganda has fallen away to reveal a sustained body of worthwhile work in the Eastern Bloc. The critical caveat here, of course, is that much of the filmic work discussed by Brockmann was banned in the GDR for long periods, if not until the state's end. We might question if the focus on the "banned" status of a film is not, ultimately, a marketing hook and something that still trades off the Cold War logics of an East swarming with the Stasi, an impenetrable political edifice, and absolute cultural lockdown. Here is the forbidden fruit, so much the tastier for once being forbidden. It is ironic, as Brockmann points out, that the end of the GDR and the attendant historical initiatives (for example the DEFA film library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst) has today made it easier to find the films of the GDR than to find FRG films of a similar vintage.

*A Critical History of German Film* is a modest book, carefully researched by Brockmann and written in straightforward prose. There are no particularly outlandish conclusions—although specialists may inevitably quibble over details—and the film mini-essays are ecumenical in their approach: sometimes following psychoanalytic lines of argument, other times a cultural studies approach, and others a formalistic line. Brockmann's aim, instead of browbeating, is to alert his reader to both the settled and live debates that surround each film. Even the decision to finish with *The Lives of Others* is a cautious option; others might have added a film from the diffuse but critically lauded Berlin school as a symbol of another kind of German filmmaking, although the "value" of this cinematic branch is still debated. Such sensibility and evenhandedness rarely makes the prose spring from the page, but the book ultimately achieves its aims and, along the way, says much about a lively century of German cinema.

#### Notes

[1]. These are, of course, Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* from 1947 (rev. ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Hake's *German National Cinema* from 2002/8 (rev. ed., London: Routledge, 2008).

[2]. Brockmann also excludes films which are not readily available with English subtitles. This is a noble, pragmatic gesture: even the most conscientious cinephile will never be able to master the languages of all cinema-producing nations, so it is safe to assume many will not have the requisite German to muddle through a film without subtitles or voice-overs.

[3]. Of the enduring debate about Lang's *Metropolis*, Brockmann concludes: "Instead of blaming Lang and his corporatist vision in *Metropolis* for helping to pave the way for the Nazis, as Kracauer comes close to doing, it would make more sense to see both *Metropolis* and the Nazis themselves as different attempts to answer fundamental questions about modernity, sexuality and economic relations that were very pressing during the Weimar Republic" (p. 95): This a sensible "middle path" position to take.

[4] Thomas Elsaesser, "Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf," *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 325-341.

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