

**Angelica Fenner.** *Race under Reconstruction in German Cinema: Robert Stemmle's Toxi.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. x + 283 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4008-5.



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## Race and the National Imaginary in Postwar West Germany

Recent works by Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria (*Zwischen Fürsorge und Ausgrenzung: Afrodeutsche Besatzungskinder im Nachkriegsdeutschland* [2002]) and Heide Fehrenbach (*Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* [2005]) have demonstrated the crucial role that African German children played in the reconstruction of race in postwar West Germany. The presence of these children, born to German women and African American occupying troops, challenged notions of Germanness among a population that was trying to deal with wartime defeat, Allied occupation, and a growing awareness of the crimes of the Holocaust. Angelica Fenner builds on this research through a series of highly sophisticated close readings of Robert Stemmle's 1952 film *Toxi*, which tells the story of the eponymous African German child Toxi who is abandoned on the doorstep of a middle-class, white household. Toxi's arrival throws the multigenerational German family—representative of the German nation as a whole—into disarray and forces members to confront their own racism. As Fenner notes in the introduction,

while her study is related to the recovery of a black German history, this is not a history of black Germans. Instead, her primary interest is in investigating the contribution made by Stemmle's melodrama in shaping historical constructions of blackness, Germanness, and belonging. In doing so, she underlines the power of visual imagery and the filmmaking industry in general in the development and dissemination of images of race. Equally, she reveals how the narrative and imagery in *Toxi* fed into wider anxieties about reformulations of identity, class, and gender roles in the Federal Republic.

*Toxi* has already been the subject of academic research by Fehrenbach. Fenner's book-length study, however, employs a wide range of theoretical approaches, such as critical whiteness studies, race theory, psychoanalysis, and feminist studies, to provide a more detailed unpacking of the film, its impact, and its legacy. The first three of six chapters are primarily devoted to looking at the film's narrative and imagery as well as discussing its director and West German attitudes toward the African German occupation children. The film was unusual in

its choice of subject matter, and while it has since been largely forgotten *Toxi* was a box office hit. It was released to coincide with the entrance of the first occupation children into the West German educational system and was an attempt to intervene in public discussions about their fate. The didactic nature of Stemmlé's film, which sought to entertain, but also to educate, helped to explain its broad appeal, and many critics deemed it to be a progressive comment on Germany and race relations. Fenner, however, demonstrates how the film perpetuated existing racial stereotypes, rendering the Toxi character eternally childlike and denying her any subjectivity. Instead, for the white protagonists and the cinema-going audience, she functioned as a vehicle for redemption and wish fulfillment. The rescue fantasy developed in the narrative enabled the former to display, and the latter to feel, tolerance toward Toxi as the representative of a minority population, unburdening them of feelings of guilt and complicity connected to the immediate past. Toxi's power as a figure of absolution was underscored by the use of religious imagery in several of the film's scenes, which Fenner analyzes in detail. At the same time, the film ultimately denied Toxi, and the African German children she stood for, inclusion within Germany society.

The second half of the study moves beyond a textual analysis of *Toxi* to look at the production, marketing, and reception of the film as well as the afterlife of the images produced both onscreen and in the associated promotional campaign. Fenner takes a number of interesting lines of inquiry, such as discussing the film in the context of West German economic reconstruction. Here she illustrates the way in which *Toxi* came to promote consumption on the one hand, while acting as a critique of excessive materialism and irrational consumer behavior, explicitly that of women and marginal groups, on the other. Against the backdrop of state financial involvement in supporting film projects, she provides an insightful discussion of the development of *Toxi* from its beginnings to the onscreen version of the film. Attention is drawn to key changes made to the original script, in particular, the omission of a final scene that would have significantly altered the film's message, offering a potentially more positive end. Although she is only able to speculate as to the reasons behind this, Fenner persuasively attributes a political significance to the changes made, suggesting that state interference in the form of effective censorship was a likely possibility. A real strength of the study is the final chapter, which showcases Fenner's original-

ity. In an intriguing investigation of the transnational influences upon Stemmlé's film, she persuasively outlines intertextual links to the racial imagery and stereotypes employed in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). She follows this with a discussion of the connections between roles played by the actress Shirley Temple and the Toxi character, whose styling closely matched that of Temple. Fenner argues that the cuteness of both child actresses enabled filmmakers to circumvent existing moral codes regarding portrayals of sexuality to produce eroticized images of sexual, and primarily in Toxi's case racial, difference that fed into existing social anxieties concerning gender roles and integration.

*Toxi* is indeed an obscure film, but it is not quite the singular film that Fenner suggests, and it is not alone in providing a cinematic insight into mid-twentieth-century reactions to the African German occupation children. Indeed, it feels like something of a lost opportunity that she reserves only a couple of paragraphs to discuss what was effectively a followup to Stemmlé's film, Herman Kugelstadt's *Der dunkle Stern* (1955), which also starred Elfie Fiegert in the main role. Released only three years later, this was less ambivalent in its message of exclusion and its use of racial stereotypes. It is, however, to Fenner's credit that in her conclusion she provides a brief overview of the continuing resonance of the images and construction of blackness in *Toxi* in more recent German films. This opens up fruitful avenues for further research. More thorough proofreading might have picked up a number of typographical errors strewn throughout the book.

Despite its narrow focus, *Race under Reconstruction in German Cinema* is an impressive and imaginative study, which makes a strong contribution to the fields of German cultural studies and critical race theory, among others. It adds new depth to our understanding of the importance of race in the reconstructing of the postwar West German national imaginary and it underlines the crucial role played by the filmmaking industry in this process. The publication of Fenner's monograph on *Toxi* also coincides with the first DVD release of the film by the University of Massachusetts DEFA Film Library, enabling access to a new and wider audience. The DVD, which offers English subtitles, includes an audio commentary provided by Fenner and Tobias Nagl, as well as useful teaching materials, making it highly suitable for use in a classroom environment.

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