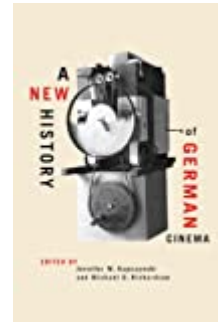




Jennifer M. Kapczynski, Michael D. Richardson, eds. *A New History of German Cinema*. Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual Series. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. xvi + 673 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-490-5.



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Eighty-Eight New Histories of German Cinema

Reading German film through history is a developed and honed tradition in German American film studies. This lens has provided us with useful categories within which to consider both the thematic and formal properties of films. These categories have included early pre-First World War film, Weimar film, Third Reich film, Rubble Film, etc. Within this well-defined chronology we have learned to approach and analyze films as texts of specific cultural and historical periods. While certainly useful and informative, this model can also be prescriptive and limiting. As film studies in more recent decades have shown, film is not only a product of history but also an agent of history.

With their new edited collection, *A New History of German Cinema*, Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson directly respond to the need to create an open dialogue between film and history, as David Wellbery and Judith Ryan have previously done with German literature in their 2005 edited collection *A New History of German Literature*. Beginning with the editors' introduction, *A New History of German Cinema* is then di-

vided into seven parts or historical periods: 1895-1918, 1918-32, 1933-45, 1945-61, 1962-76, 1977-89, and 1990-2011. Each section is composed of a chronological series of cinematic-related events. Covering over a century of cinema history, these events are clearly ordered and individually dated, starting from 11 November 1895 all the way to 11 February 2008. Each contribution begins with a specific date and delves into the, in many cases, unexpected details of an event that directly or indirectly played a significant role in cinema history, and possibly even history itself. Although a chronological organization remains in place in this book, with historical period summaries to introduce each section, each essay independently sketches its own narrative and history from the perspective of a single event. In a sense, this collection draws together eighty-eight different histories of German cinema. Taking a bottom-up approach to history, this event-based "New History of German Cinema" seeks diversity and heterogeneity over hegemony and homogenous umbrella approaches. With a multitude of perspectives, provided by a wide range of German film

scholars, this book presents German film history as an organic and open-ended process of creation and contingency. Indeed, the book would have perhaps been more suitably named "New Histories of German Cinema."

Despite their brevity (roughly four to five pages in length), each contribution meticulously reveals the hidden history of a watershed moment in German cinema—a delectable, hitherto untold backstory of a particular film, filmmaker, or actor. Included in this comprehensive patchwork of events are well-known stories, such as Max Skladanowsky's flawed invention of the Bioscop projector articulated in Janelle Blankenship's contribution, "1 November 1985: Premiere of Wintergarten Program Highlights Transitional Nature of Early Film Technology," and the controversial publication of the Oberhausen Manifesto described in Eric Rentschler's "22 February 1962: Oberhausen Manifesto Creates Founding Myth for New German Cinema." However, this book also gives equal space to the oft forgotten, somewhat anecdotal events of German film history. These include, for instance, the eruption of postcolonial debates and the role of transnationalism in cinema with Joe May's series *Die Herrin der Welt* in Tobias Nagl's piece "6 March 1920: Chinese Students Raise Charges of Racism against *Die Herrin der Welt*" and Berolt Brecht and Fritz Lang's failed film project against National Socialism, *Hangman also Die!*, as illustrated by Jonathan Skolik's essay, "28 May 1942: Bertolt Brecht and Fritz Lang Write a Hollywood Screenplay."

Distancing itself in style and concept from earlier American-based German cinema books, such as Sabine Hake's *German National Cinema* (2002; 2nd ed. 2008); Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk's edited collection *The German Cinema Book* (2008); and Stephen Brockman's *A Critical History of German Film* (2011), *A New History of German Cinema* not only is an updated, more expansive version of previous German cinema histories, but also embraces a "new history" approach that focuses on the minor histories that make up the legacy of German cinema history. This book follows a more recent trend in cinema studies that questions and challenges history's function as a mechanism for structuring national and cultural identity. For instance, the book bears conceptual resemblance to Isolde Standish's *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (2006); Sava Arslan's *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (2010); and Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers's edited collection *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History* (2011). These contem-

porary studies likewise question the validity of a definitive history through a similar lens of "newness" and prefer to suggest that, as Standish relates in the introduction to her abovementioned book, "there are identifiable discourses of history that link political, social, and cultural trends to specific time frames."^[1]

While it acknowledges and problematizes the role of historical discourse in cultural production and analysis, I wonder if *A New History of German Cinema* could perhaps have also more thoroughly addressed the crucial debates surrounding the concept and configuration of "national cinema," which, given the nature of the book, is clearly at stake here. Starting already in the 1990s with Stephen Crofts's much-cited article "Reconceptualizing National Cinema" (1993), and revisited in Valentina Vitali and Paul Willeman's edited collection *Theorizing National Cinema* (2006), "national cinema" has been placed in quotation marks as something that always requires definition. As Crofts explains, "the political, economic, and cultural regimes of different nation-states license some seven varieties of 'national cinema.'"^[2] As Kapczynski and Richardson note in their introduction, especially in the age of globalization, on the one hand, and transnationalism, on the other, a totalizing cultural and linguistic categorization can be problematic. My question, then, is not so much what is *German cinema* but what is "national cinema" for this larger project? Of course, several of the individual contributions do directly engage questions of national and transnational cinema(s). But is (German) national cinema since the 1990s by definition transnational (or at least hyphenated), as Andrea Reimann seems to suggest in "10 February 1999: Berlinale Premiere of Four Turkish-German Films Signals New Chapter in Cinematic Diversity"? Or could it be a kind of "countercinema" (p. 607), as Marco Abel proposes in his piece on the Berlin School, "22 January 2007: Film Establishment Attacks 'Berlin School' as Wrong Kind of National Cinema"?

Overall, this is an extremely rich and informative book and I am not able to do justice to its comprehensive scope and eighty-eight individual essays in this brief review. But to conclude I would like to underscore both its important contribution to the area of German film studies as well as its challenge to prescriptive historical inquiry vis-à-vis cultural and artistic production. Without engaging theoretical debates about the issue of the shifting and fragmented nature of "national cinema," *A New History of German Cinema* certainly performs the task demanded of this changing discipline and revises, reconfigures, and advances German national cinema in all of its

dimensions.

Academic, 2006), 14.

Notes

[1]. Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (London: Bloomsbury

[2]. Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 3 (1993), 50.

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