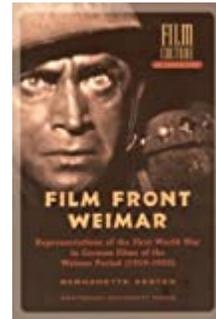




**Bernadette Kester.** *Film Front Weimar: Representations of the First World War in German Films of the Weimar Period (1919-1933)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003. 280 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-5356-597-1.



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I sat in on a dissertation defense some years back. After the lackluster performance by the candidate was judged acceptable, the department chair betrayed both his reluctance and his resignation in this case with the comment, “Well, I guess you don’t have to have a thesis anymore to write one.” I shared this chair’s exasperation while reading Bernadette Kester’s examination of Weimar Era war films: as best I can discern, it does not try to argue anything. To be fair, Kester never promises to advance an argument, in fact, her stated goals for her book are to outline the form and style of the films, to characterize their reviews in the mainstream press, and, finally, to identify what these films tell us about how Weimar society dealt with the aftermath of the Great War (p. 25). The answer to this last and, to me, most ambitious question is, apparently, not much. The dozens of plot descriptions and summaries of critical reviews that make up the majority of this book do not add up to any illuminating statements about the social, political, or cultural significance of this body of films. Nor can they, for without a theoretical framework or thesis, Kester can only describe. It is a frustrating experience for the reader who is left wondering what work these films did for contemporary audiences and what their historical and cultural legacy might be.

What Kester does do quite well is consolidate the

historical record of a film genre that, for the most part, has escaped significant scholarly attention. This is no small feat as many of the films described here have already been lost to the ravages of inadequate preservation and, ironically, war. Repeatedly, Kester is forced to try to reconstruct a film from nothing more than its promotional material and surviving press clippings. Similarly, Kester has helped to resurrect the memory of the prolific director, Heinz Paul, who was responsible for both feature films (*Die andere Seite*, 1931) and war documentaries (*Douaumont: Die Hoelle von Verdun*, also 1931). The volume includes a filmography of thirty-one movies Kester identifies as war films produced between 1918 and 1933. Here we find credit information (such as cast, direction, length, and whether a military adviser participated in the filming), though this documentation, too, is necessarily incomplete. It would have been useful for other scholars if Kester had indicated whether and where the film is archived, but this is only provided for films she was able to screen in Berlin (p. 291ff).

Paradoxically, Kester has little to add to the body of knowledge already available about some of the better-known films in her study, such as *Westfront 1918* (1930) and *Morgenrot* (1933). Plot description dominates Kester’s discussion of the films. In the few instances where she does evaluate the films aesthetically, her com-

ments are superficial. At two pages, Kester's section on the cinematography of *Westfront 1918* is her longest excursus into the filmic qualities of her subject matter (p. 134ff.). This is entirely inadequate to illustrate her examination of this and other film's realism. The summary of press reviews is equally of limited assistance. We learn, not surprisingly, that some reviewers found the film realistic, perhaps excessively so, while others did not. This pattern is repeated throughout the book. We rarely learn more about a film's critical reception than that some papers liked it while others panned it, with the differences usually falling along political lines. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Kester impresses with her thorough archival research and disappoints with her dearth of analysis.

A typical example of where Kester whets her reader's appetite only to leave him hungry is when the topic of race enters the discussion. *Westfront 1918* and *Niemandsland* (1931), both considered by Kester to be anti-war films, each have a French-African soldier as a main character. Kester comments on G. W. Pabst's racist portrayal of the black man as savage killer in *Westfront 1918* and contrasts this with the enlightened and pacifist black figure shown in *Niemandsland*. Yet Kester has little more to add about the significance of race in these films than the comment that "some critics were clearly more comfortable with accepting an African character in a negative role than in a positive one" (p. 159). Kester ventures almost no speculation about the strategy of casting the enemy as a racial other, nor does she contextualize these characters in light of the use of African soldiers during the French-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr Valley in 1923, even when one of her citations indirectly refers to it. Despite the opportunities such moments in the films provide for scrutiny of their social and political character, Kester leaves them mainly unexplored.

Lest it start to sound too much like I am complaining that Kester did not write the book I wanted to read, let me broaden my grievance to include the larger process in play here. Kester is a military historian who has set herself a very large task while allowing herself pre-

vious few tools to complete it. Her introduction enumerates the many limitations she imposes upon her study: no war literature except when dealing explicitly with a film adaptation, only German or Austrian films, almost no film aesthetics, and although she does not specifically say so, Kester also chooses not to employ much cultural or sociological theory to speak of. As a result, she cannot talk at any length about the film adaptation of Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1930), although, taken together, they were the most significant portrayal of war to reach German audiences during the Weimar era. Without delving into film theory, Kester's treatment of the important differences between documentary and feature films is constrained to questions of historical accuracy. Of course, one cannot talk about everything in its widest possible context, but that is not the problem with this book. This study is handicapped by an excessively conservative notion of what historical scholarship should look like. The attempt to write *only* history here produces *mere* history; we get a story with no meaning.

Perhaps it is best to see this book as a starting point. Kester's research is indeed important, so much so that it should be augmented by the work of cultural scholars. Literary, film, and other researchers in the humanities tend, too, to labor in isolation. Why? The natural sciences has long benefited from teamwork while we still insist on the myth of the lone act of original work (i.e. genius) that is supposed to be the humanities dissertation. Instead of accepting the inevitability of the "thesis without a thesis," is it not time to start encouraging a collaborative process that has a chance of saying something?

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