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Wolfgang Kabatek. *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino.* Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2003. 223 S. + 20 s/w Abb. EUR 22.80 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89942-116-3.

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Becoming German in the Cinema

Today, when watching a feature film made in the Weimar Republic, one would be prone to see a silent move from the 1920s. Film historians would certainly also see a document from inter-war Germany, perhaps even being able to recognize some of the settings' near-Berlin locations. But audiences contemporary with these films surely saw something else. They saw exotic places, like India, China, or a South-American jungle, and they saw histories of long-since gone medieval kings and knights, or historical places such as Renaissance Florence or Venice. They saw something other than themselves and the country where these films were set and shot; they saw other people and other places. Today, hardly anyone would take these films at their face value in this sense. Instead of seeing India or China, the present-day viewer would notice notions of India and China held by audiences in the Weimar Republic. Instead of seeing exotic people from the other side of the globe we, today, would be prone to see what people in the 1920s held to be exotic. This distinction between what we see today and what the films' original audiences saw some eighty years ago forms the point of departure for Wolfgang Kabatek's new study *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino*.

Kabatek intents to study inter-war German notions of the exotic, the strange and uncanny by examining Weimar German films and their contemporary reception. He wants to find out how notions of "the Other" were shaped within the Weimar Republic and thereby, reversibly, how people identified themselves in inter-war Germany. Cinema, he says, is not so much a producer of myth as it is a distributor of myth that has been produced elsewhere in society (p. 11). He quotes Homi Bhabha's remark that "the 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves' " (p. 45). Kabatek's hypothesis is that people in the Weimar Republic–after the lost war, the fall of the empire, and in the face of social, political and economical life in flux–were searching for a sustainable collective identity for themselves. Images of exotic "others" were used to delimit this identity in-the-making by negatively defining "who we are not" (pp. 31, 57, 61, 87, 108f, 120ff, 127, 137). Even if it is not explicitly spelled out, the implicit thesis of this study is that the masses of Weimar Germany actively, if not consciously, used feature film imagery of the perceived exotic "Other" in order

to satisfy a collectively experienced lack of a consensual German national identity. Commentators outside of this republic, both in place and time, have misunderstood this point. They have generally thought that Germans lived in the Weimar Republic, while actually the masses of people living in that state were not Germans, but rather people who wanted to become Germans–although no consensus existed on the meaning of being "German."

This is a thought-provoking thesis, indeed. If it can be proven by a rigid empirical study it would make a highly valuable contribution not only in the fields of film studies, or to the historiography of the Weimar Republic, but to the complex historical and sociological debate on nations and nationalism as a whole. The question is whether Kabatek's empirical study proves his thesis tenable.

Kabatek never explicitly formulates the aim of his study, nor its limitations. From the title it appears that he had intended to study the imagery of the others in Weimar German film in general. However, when reading the book, one discovers that he only discusses the early years of the Weimar Republic, especially the period 1919-21, and that his empirical study is delimited to a mere handful of film titles. Since only films from roughly the first half of the 1920s have been considered, the book title's reference to Weimar Cinema as a whole is somewhat misleading.

Without having the purpose of the work spelled out, one has to pay a lot of attention when reading, in order not to become lost among the associations that somewhat randomly fill up the text. Only in the third chapter does the reader get a more substantial notion of what is going on. Here Kabatek explicitly presents the hypothesis that has guided his work. He claims that distinctions between "us and the other" can be seen as indications, constituting mental maps that one uses when localizing oneself in the world (p. 46). His hypothesis is that the cinematic experience as such shapes a distinction between "us, the viewing audience" and "the others on the screen," which helps to promote a unanimous collective identity among the members of the audience. Furthermore, Kabatek refers to the works of Detlev Peukert and Peter Sloterdijk when pointing to the Weimar Republic as something of an almost ideal-type case study when examining crisis in modern societies as such (p. 46f). Since the problems of modern society seem to have been crystallized in the Weimar Republic, the role of public reception of film when constituting collective identity could here be studied with precision and then extrapolated when discussing modern society as a whole, Kabatek seems to argue.

Problems emerge, however, beginning with the attempt to put together a methodology. Kabatek discusses various aspects of cultural studies, as well as the debate on nation and nationalism, history of mentalities, film theory, anthropology, Cassirer on myth, Assmann on identity, Bauman on modernity, Foucault on heterotrophy, and so on. The basic fault in this book is that Kabatek has not clearly formulated the purpose of his study, and that his hypothesis is too broad for the narrow and disparate empirical material to which he applies it. Consequently his analysis loses momentum and he cannot do justice to his own research approach, which promises more than it can fulfill. The structure of the work is symptomatic both of the great potential of the topic and its inadequate realization here. The book is structured around eight chapters. Unfortunately, none of them is arranged systematically. Themes overlap, and an argument that has been cut short in one chapter is then suddenly re-addressed in another. The actual aim of this study is an attempt to pin down the way masses of people in the early days of the Weimar Republic tried to indirectly bolster what they perceived to be their own, if still inconclusive, national identity by directly making a clear demarcation against their other. According to Kabatek's theoretical stance, this production of collective self-identity should be visibly seen in the then contemporary receptions of popular feature film. In the end, however, this pastiche of inspirations does not prove a coherent methodology. Instead he somewhat randomly approaches his sources.

Problems in the study continue to be evident when Kabatek tries to test his hypothesis on his source material, which includes both the films themselves and contemporary reactions to these films, such as reviews, etc. Kabatek asserts that although a film like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919) was produced with a highbrow audience in mind, it can very well be compared with a film like *Die Spinnen* (1919-20), which was produced for a lowbrow audience, and with Colin Ross's film documentary from around the world, *Mit dem Kurbelkasten um die Erde* (1925). He claims that the supremacy of Western culture is generally put forward in inter-war German film after having done a close examination of the film *Das indische Grabmal* (1921). And after having done a close reading of Bela BalÃ¡zs *Der sichtbare Mensch oder Die Kultur des Films* (1924), he argues that the readability of physiognomy was essential for audiences when making sense of what they saw in the cinema.

Kabatek's many assertions are interesting indeed, and they are often productively thought-provoking. But

they remain unproven. And at the same time, Kabatek fails to address issues that appear almost obvious in his own narrative, such as the gender aspect. In a film like, for instance, the here closely examined *Das indische Grabmal*, the whole scenario has been structured around the male gaze, according to which the body of the woman is as exotic as the face of the Indian. Nevertheless, Kabatek has not with one word touched upon the issue of gender. Kabatek's book appears more as a sketch to a forthcoming research project than it does a conclusive study. The promises set forward in this book makes at least this reviewer hope for Kabatek to provide a further, in-depth study on this theme.

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