
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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German Essays on Film
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This collection of forty-three essays on film is a long overdue and welcome addition to English language scholarship on German film. While most of the articles will be familiar to the German film specialist as they are readily available in German, many will be new to those who have not spent time researching German film. The collection samples the proliferation of diverse writing on film and the cinema more generally in Germany throughout the twentieth century. As the editors point out in a brief introduction which explains the parameters of the collection, the essays range from works by figures familiar to an Anglo-American audience — for example, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, Gertrud Koch, R.W. Fassbinder — to many by lesser, even unknown, writers such as Claire Goll and Malwine Rennert. In its fidelity to the shape of the discussion on film as it was developed in the Wilhelmine and Weimar years, put in the service of political ends under National Socialism, and revitalized in the post war years, *German Essays on Film* includes works, not only by film critics and historians, but also, by critical theorists, literary critics, playwrights, politicians, film directors and artists. The wide range of contributors appropriately reflects the scope of German intellectuals who engaged with the philosophical and intellectual debate regarding film as a medium and the cinema as institution in the twentieth century.

The collection is broken down into four historical periods: Late Wilhelmine Germany, Weimar Republic 1918-33, Nazi Germany 1933-45 — and Those Who Fled..., Postwar Germany: 1945 to the Present. Within these sections, the chapters are grouped

roughly according to the occupation of the authors: Artists, Critics and Scholars; Theorists; Artists and Bureaucrats in the 'Third Reich'; Intellectuals in Exile, and various permutations of these. The chronological organization of the collection serves to underline the ongoing German intellectual commitment to the debate on the role of cinema in social and political life. In addition, the selected texts represent how the starting point for these discussions — which took place in both newspapers and intellectual journals throughout the twentieth century — was typically the aesthetic and technology of the image. Readers of *New German Critique* will know from Anton Kaes's article on the *Kino-Debatte* of the existence of the animated debate over the aesthetic, ontological and social definition of the cinema that took place in Germany up to 1930s. Similarly, those interested in classical film theory and philosophy will have come across references to the energy with which questions regarding the ontology and social role of the cinema were debated in Germany prior to 1933. However, with this anthology, for the first time, the English speaker is able to recognize that Adorno and Horkheimer, Kracauer, Eisner and Balasz were not lone geni working in a void. Thomas Y. Levin indicates in his introduction to *The Mass Ornament* that Kracauer's thinking was built on and belonged to a long tradition of German philosophical thought. And *German Essays on Film* extends this context for approaching writing on film in Germany when it gestures toward the writing of journalistic, literary and cultural circles that actively pursued an understanding of the relatively new medium up to the 1930s. Similarly, in light of the collected essays, Kracauer's search for an explanation of the national psyche via the 1920s films in his now canonical *From Caligari to Hitler* can be appreciated for its continuation of approaches to film that were inaugurated by pre-World War I authors, authors who have slipped from public awareness today.

The bringing together of texts on film that span the twentieth century prompts recognition of the centrality of the German contribution to the conception of film, particularly, as a social and political medium. While readers beyond the Germanist will be quick to acknowledge the immense impact of Adorno and Horkheimer's writing on the Culture Industry, on rereading texts such as Helke Sander's 'Feminism and Film,' Jutta Brückner's 'Women's Films are Searches for Traces,' and Gertrud Koch's 'Exchanging the Gaze: revisioning Feminist Film Theory,' readers are refreshingly reminded that some of the most significant pioneering work in feminist film theory was done in the pages of *Frauen und Film* in Germany in the 1970s. Beyond the contribution made by the New German Filmmakers and scholars such as Koch and Karsten Witte (Germany's first film professor) to the development of film studies as an academic discipline, the reader will be surprised at the sensitivity and insight into the effect of a film on its audience articulated

by the proponents of National Socialism, such as Fritz Hippler and Dr. Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels famous speech at the Kaiserhof on March 28, 1933 is printed here in English translation for the first time. Beyond the connections to pre-1930s discussions of the role of film in German social and cultural life, when Goebbels speech is juxtaposed with essays by directors such as Leni Riefenstahl and Viet Harlan, we also get a glimpse into the common NS insistence on a certain brand of realism as propaganda.

German Essays on Film will be of use to a number of readerships. First, the collection is an invaluable addition to syllabi for courses on histories of German film, and in particular, histories of early German film and the discourses in its midst. For courses on New German Cinema the collection is not an imperative because eight of the twelve chapters are reprinted from Eric Rentschler's *West German Filmmakers on Film*. That said, the remaining four chapters in the post-45 section on artists and filmmakers are the work of Wolfgang Staudte, Gunter Groll and his fellow editors at *Monatshefte für Film und Fernsehen*, and DEFA filmmakers Konrad Wolf and Wolfgang Kohlhaase. All of these essays are published here for the first time in English. As the editors acknowledge, there might have been a broader selection of works from DEFA filmmakers if not for space constraints. However, the few texts published here at least hint at the rich and complex theoretical background to the pursuit of filmmaking in the German Democratic Republic.

Students and scholars of German art and culture more generally will also be drawn to the anthology. One of the distinguishing characteristics of early writing on film (not only in Germany) is its attempt to define and legitimate film via its relationship to the other arts. Texts such as those by Fritz Lang ('the Artistic Composition of the Film Drama'), Bertolt Brecht ('From The Three-Penny Trial,') and others will complement Lotte Eisner's renowned *The Haunted Screen*, the strength of which has always been the connection it draws and the distinctions it makes between painting, theater and literature. As critics searched for a language with which to describe and define the cinema, they often took recourse to discourses on the other arts, and a number of the essays here collected are testimony to that cultural trend. Similarly, their language and form of argument are indicative of the broader approach to writing on aesthetics of various media, especially up to the 1930s. The reader will be interested to see the continuation of much of this rhetorical and polemical approach in the contributions by filmmakers and bureaucrats of the National Socialist period.

The collection will also appeal to anyone interested in the history of film theory. Once again, *German Essays on Film* is at its most informative in its pre-1945 sections. As such, it forms an important companion piece to other collections of early film theory —

Richard Abel's wonderful two volume *French Film Theory*, Richard Taylor's *The Film Factory*, the growing number of publications of classical film theory as well as more specialist publications such as the forthcoming issue of *October* devoted to the writings of Bela Balasz. Beyond the reified film theory of the *Screen* theorists, post-Second World War discourses on the sociological impact and audience reception of film are usually —and often quite correctly —understood as the offspring of cultural studies. The spirited discussions that took place in Germany and are sampled in *German Essays on Film*, illuminate that the challenge to understand how this medium impacts its immediate audience and its broader socio-cultural, even political, landscape, in fact, began well before the blossoming of cultural studies as an academic discourse in the 1980s. Moreover, the theoretical engagement with film as a cultural and sociological tool is shown to reach further and wider than the influence of the Frankfurt School. Many of the authors in this collection, often names that will be unknown to the reader, such as Herbert Tannenbaum ('Art at the Cinema'), were keenly interested in how to define the medium,. In another example, Groll and the *Monaqtshefte* editors ('Every Audience, as Everybody Knows' Has the Films it Deserves (1956),)' were among the many in Germany who were committed to the establishment of a vibrant and engaged film culture through establishing designated film journals.

Another prospective audience of the collection will be those scholars interested in the use of culture for the articulation of national identity. Similar to other European nations, the German struggle to define itself across two world wars, and division in the Cold War, was explored through its artistic and cultural product. Thus, hand in hand with a search for the cultural and social role of the cinema in daily life came the search for its role in the formation of national identity. *German Essays on Film* charts this search across the undulations of twentieth-century German history through the juxtaposition of key texts such as Goebbels aforementioned address at the Kaiserhof, the Oberhausen Manifesto, the deeply engaged writing of filmmakers such as Fassbinder, Kluge and Helke Sander, and, for example, Enno Patalas's 1952 discussion of the artistic crisis in German Postwar Film. As with many of the articles collected here, Patalas's intervention is better able to be seen in retrospect for its marking of a critical juncture in Germany's history of writing on film: in this case, the conceptualization of the formation of a leftist cinema in Post-War Germany.

For all its strengths, *German Essays on Film* is limited by its genre. There are the usual shortcomings of an anthology of reprints, despite the contribution made by the new translations. The editors claim that where they have included works by better know authors, they have chosen lesser known examples of their writing. This is so in one or two

examples, however does not hold as a general principle of the collection. Essays by Lukacs, Kracauer, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Eisner are now canonical works. Similarly, the essays by New German Filmmakers, and academics such as Koch and Schlüpmann are standard fare for students and scholars of the periods. Once again, this criticism could not be leveled at the pre-Second World War essays which represent a truly original addition to the fields of study already discussed.

Another shortcoming—which again, says more about the nature of the genre of anthology in the German Library series—is the abridging of these essays. Many of the post-45 essays are given in excerpted form which will mean that readers will need to track down the full length version of the original if it is to be of any use to them. However, one could also argue that the anthology introduces maximum number of texts, and will prompt the reader to follow up the full versions of essays of interest.

While the focus on feminist writing, and writing by women (including Leni Riefenstahl) is to be applauded, the noticeable absence in *German Essays on Film* is the formative writings from the avant-garde. For example, the writing of artist and filmmaker Hans Richter, or the filmmaker/theoretician/ writer Harun Farocki would give the collection a more well-rounded form. The writings of Richter, Farocki and others are historically and sociologically significant, and have an impact on all of the trajectories represented by the collection as a whole: the history of film theory, the search for a national German identity, the cinema as cultural and political tool, and so on. The omission of any such texts on the avant-garde highlights the anthology's emphasis on the social and political aspects of the German writings on cinema. While this is, indeed, the impetus behind much of the German writing on film, the strands of thought that celebrate the possibilities of the medium as pure art form are underplayed. Writings from the avant-garde would give a stronger vision of the diversity and continuing engagement with the importance of the moving image aesthetic in the formation of social identity in a Germany which, in turn, continues to transform.

Nevertheless, *German Essays on Film* is welcomed for its contribution to the growing awareness of the richness of German film culture, especially pre-1945. For the non-German speaker, individual essays will be extremely useful when conceptualizing German film, and culture more generally.

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