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Published on H-German (October, 2006)

**Filmic Persuasions: Exposing the Ideological Role of Genre Films in the Third Reich**

Debates continue as to whether, and to what degree, fascism was an ideological phenomenon, a social movement or an aesthetic manifestation. George Mosse was one of several academics to explain the clear bridge between political ideas and artistic movements, contending that aesthetics was “the cement which held fascism together.”[1] The trademark mass rallies and swastikas of Nazi Germany are exemplary of this claim, but equally important is the ideological role of the more than one thousand motion pictures released throughout the years of the National Socialist regime. With this background in mind, Mary-Elizabeth O’Brien’s new book makes a highly valuable contribution to furthering our understanding of the complex interplay between popular culture and Nazi ideology, and the ways in which popular culture was subtly, yet very effectively, manipulated to reinforce public support for the regime.

Sabine Hake and others have already illuminated the Nazis’ “forced coordination” of the German film industry through the strict regulation and editing of material throughout the production process.[2] O’Brien’s book redirects the focus of analysis to a different area than previous works on German films of the Nazi era. Much critical attention has concentrated primarily on overt propaganda films,[3] whereas O’Brien demonstrates that propaganda need not be limited to the explicit realm of films like Fritz Hippler’s *The Eternal Jew*, released in 1940, and the equally infamous *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Following on from the investigation of the bridge between German (popular) cultural values and National Socialist ideology in the recent anthology, *Cultural History Through a National Socialist Lens*,[4] O’Brien stresses that “although the National Socialist government considered film a vital indoctrination tool and instituted measures to regulate all aspects of filmmaking, it also recognized that the most effective propaganda hides its intentions and appeals to the emotions” (p. 1). O’Brien’s subsequent analysis of thirteen genre films clearly demonstrates the accuracy and significance of this premise.

The volume includes five substantive chapters organized thematically according to the popular film genres discussed: the historical musical, the foreign adventure film, the home-front film, the melodrama and the problem film. In contrast to previous works on German film, which are predominantly divided into analyses of individual films, this structure allows O’Brien to probe much more deeply into the political context surrounding the production and release of these films. O’Brien discusses both blockbuster hits and commercial flops. Unfortunately, none of the films examined are available with English subtitles and several are accessible only in German archives. While this difficulty creates a certain weakness in the book in one regard, it also attests to the importance of O’Brien’s work in dealing with previously unexamined sources.

Drawing on extensive research in German archives, indicated by the text’s exhaustive endnotes, O’Brien shows how popular culture in Nazi Germany succeeded in producing what she terms an “enchantment of reality” that satisfied the citizenry’s hunger for stability and emotional release, while simultaneously “developing and reinforcing a value system that harmonizes with the totalitarian state’s political program” (p. 4). In a chapter exploring the oft-dismissed genre of the historical musical and its contribution to the “social construction of happiness,” O’Brien’s exploration of the antisemitic musical, *Robert und Bertram* (1939), released just after *Kristallnacht*, reveals that behind the abundance of musical gaiety and contrived happy endings lay a more sinister pro-
cess of ideological production, transmission and reception. Even those films that seem to elicit no support for the “racial” elements of Nazi ideology can still be seen to contribute to the strengthening of Nazism’s grip on the collective (un?)conscious. In O’Brien’s words, “the sense of certainty and permanence provided by genre films reassured audiences that a stable, ordinary, and secure world continued to exist outside the movie theatre—despite all rational evidence to the contrary” (p. 6).

As O’Brien clearly states from the outset, “the Nazi regime did not merely terrorize its citizens into submission, it also used seduction and offered people many of the things they wanted: stability, a traditional value system, a sense of belonging, and the belief in a better standard of living” (p. 1). While the “enchanting” power of film and its effects on German citizens is undeniable, this assertion may run into the problem of overgeneralizing about the civilian population as a helpless, impressionable mass seduced by Nazi culture. Keeping in mind the difficulties of gauging popular reception and ideological impact of films screened more than half a century ago, O’Brien negotiates this issue in a professional and sophisticated manner. Noting at one point the dire “lack of empirical studies on the moviegoing public in Nazi Germany” (p. 30), O’Brien supplements her analysis of primary texts with documents from Der Deutsche Film, the official organ of Joseph Goebbels’s propaganda ministry, popular fan magazines including Filmwelt and Filmwoche, daily trade sheets and media releases disseminated by the film studios. These seldom studied historical artifacts complement O’Brien’s in-depth discussion of the films, which balances adequate description and detailed analysis.

O’Brien points out in her introduction that only 153 of the 1,094 feature films released in Germany during Nazi rule are generally considered to be “outright propaganda” (p. 9). While Nazi-era German cinema at times transmitted explicit messages regarding the desired “marginalization of Jews, asocials, and biological inferiors” (p. 260) that were in line with the “racial” elements of an ideology used to justify the deaths of millions, popular genre films also played a role. O’Brien’s highly valuable analysis of German films clearly shows that “entertainment films subtly participate in the larger framework of everyday fascism, perhaps more effectively that overt propaganda precisely because their messages are less intrusive and more readily acceptable” (p. 10). O’Brien’s elucidation of the varying forms that passive ideologies can take not only contributes a great deal to an understanding of the complex interplay of politics and culture in Nazi Germany specifically, and of the fundamental importance of the aesthetic to fascism in general, but also points to a crucial lesson that should be taken from the past and encouraged to resonate in current times.

Notes

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