

Fall 2009

## Destination London: German-Speaking Emigréa and British Cinema, 1925-1950

Martina Moeller

*Université de Provence*, [martina.moeller@univ-provence.fr](mailto:martina.moeller@univ-provence.fr)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge>

---

### Recommended Citation

Moeller, Martina (2009) "Destination London: German-Speaking Emigréa and British Cinema, 1925-1950," *EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge/vol1/iss1/5>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

*DESTINATION LONDON: GERMAN-SPEAKING ÉMIGRÉS AND BRITISH CINEMA, 1925-1950*, EDITED BY TIM BERGFELDER AND CHRISTIAN CARGNELLI  
OXFORD: BERGHAIN BOOKS, 2008. 272 PP. \$90/ £45 HARDCOVER

This book on German-speaking émigrés in British cinema represents the outcome of a three-year research project at the University of Southampton (UK) under the direction of Tim Bergfelder (Professor in Film Studies, Southampton) and Christian Cargnelli (Vienna). The anthology consists of 18 contributions on the subject of how transnational cultural transfers from the German-speaking continent to Britain influenced British film production from the mid-1920s to the 1940s. This topic is considered from a film historian's point of view, and explores the developments and changes of aesthetic trends, production methods, and professional training due to the impact of the German-speaking film personnel.

In the introductory contribution,<sup>1</sup> Bergfelder outlines the book's methodological framework of two simultaneous, but partly diverging paths: the film industries' economic imperative of international expansion; competition and cooperation (often accompanied by a migration of labor); the ideological project of re-centering the definition of national cinema through critical and public discourse; and film policy' (2). Then he argues to read transnational cultural transfers in cinema not as a recent process, but as inherent to cinema from its early beginnings (16). Thus, Bergfelder's and Cargnelli's book presents the first steps of investigating a subject that was too-long neglected by film research because of the dominance of Hollywood cinema. Another decisive methodological aspect on the topic of exile and cinema is Bergfelder's distinction between the terms 'exiles' and 'émigrés.' This differentiation provides the structure of the book in two parts. The first one deals with film production until the mid 1930s and the second part concerns film production until the 1940s. Each contribution represents a case study about the activities of German-speaking film personnel within the British studio system or during short transitory stays before leaving to Hollywood. While earlier studies on exile (in Hollywood) foremost considered the social and existential situation of exiles, these topics are discussed here only with regard to how they impact "wider patterns of a national film culture" in British cinema (7). This and the focus on British cinema differentiates the book from earlier studies such '*Etwas besseres als den Tod...*' *Filmexile in Hollywood. Porträts, Filme, Dokumente*<sup>2</sup> by Helmut G. Asper. Moreover, the film

---

<sup>1</sup> And such as in earlier publications: Bergfelder, Tim: *The Nation Vanishes*. In: Hijort, Mette; Mackenzie, Scott (eds.): *Cinema and Nation*. London and New York: Routledge 2000, p.139.

<sup>2</sup> Marburg: Schüren Verlag 2002.

personnel investigated covers, also in distinction to earlier publications, several professional groups including directors, cinematographers, set designers and composers, actors and writers as well as specific German and British production companies. Thus, the book importantly contributes to the developments and changes of visual style in British cinema as a ‘national imaginary,’ profoundly marked by the impact of the German-speaking film personnel, against the background of changing policies in cinema production, British law and other central aspects of the time historical background.

Special attention is paid in many of these contributions as to how the foreign influence of a non-realist Expressionist style conflicted with the established principles of a realist tradition in British cinema. Bergfelder analyses and discusses the influence of the director E.A. Dupont in the context of the British studios within the years of the flourishing exchange of film personnel with the Ufa studios in Berlin/Potsdam. In the article on *Flamboyant Realism*, the film researcher Kelly Robinson outlines with the example of the German cameraman Werner Brandes in the BIP (British International Pictures) studios how Germanic film techniques were adapted to British realism. In this period of the mid 1920s, in Hollywood and in the Ufa production studios, conditions would drastically change so that creativity became more and more restricted for economic reasons. The BIP frequently hired German film personnel; the working conditions in the British studios represented for many a great degree of artistic freedom. Robinson focuses on outlining the cross-boarder cultural influences, paying special attention to Werner Brandes’ contributions to films such as *Moulin Rouge*, *Piccadilly* and *The Informer*. With these examples, she underscores the different preferences in terms of cinema aesthetics and explains how the two great chains of the visual tradition in Weimar cinema -- the filmic realism and the very artistic style of extravagant cinematography such as in Robert Wiene’s *Caligari* -- provoked the viewing habits of the English audience, who were more sensitive for an art film that concealed the art. Robinson writes that the narrative in these films is indeed often subservient to an almost purely visual film style. There are sequences that serve ‘no purpose but to show off the spectacular sets and superb lighting effects’ (p. 72) – a style, which had developed in the Ufa studios of the 1920 as a kind of commercial strategy. Thus, Robinson’s case study shows that typical Germanic film devices from the 1920s before being softened and integrated up to a certain level into what is called the British realism, worked as a provocation in British (such as in Hollywood cinema) due to their non-conformity to the classical style.

The film researchers Sarah Street and Laurie N. Ede provide different views on the impact of émigré production designers on British film productions during the 1930s. Street concentrates on the work of set designer Alfred Junge in

order to make him recognized as one of the most important contributors to the development of visual style in British cinema. She aims in particular to demonstrate the visual realization of atmosphere and looks in musicals and thrillers as well as to transport ideas of modernity and design trends into cinematographic visual style. Ede demonstrates how far the particular visual style of Ernö Metzler deviates from the practice of the British studio system, prompting him finally to leave Britain for Hollywood.

The last three essays focus on film composers, a subject often underestimated. Thus, another strong aspect of the book is how these articles consider the role of film music, produced by German-speaking composers, in creating and supporting typical British and Scottish imaginaries. A particular interesting case is that of the Austrian composer Josef Zmigrod who anglicized his name into Allan Gray (apparently inspired by Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*) long before coming to Britain. Gray wrote the music for Michael Powell's post-war film *I know Where I'm Going!* This film is considered a typical British-Scottish home production and yet so much marked by German speaking émigrés such as scriptwriter Pressburger, set designer Junge and composer Gray.

Bergfelder's and Cargnelli's contribution to the subject of German-speaking émigrés in British cinema indicates the necessity of a wide research field not yet very memorialized. All the essays of this volume are interesting to read and profoundly researched. Altogether, they prompt new reflections on aspects of British cinema in the early years of frequent co-production and later during the flow of film personnel escaping the Nazi regime. Moreover, this study clearly outlines how importantly set designers, cameramen, scriptwriters and composers contribute to film production, but they are often ignored because of primary interest in directors and actors. The publication indicates only one weak point. Bergfelder points out the aim of identifying the impact of the transnational German-speaking film personnel within the context of British national film culture. Given the fact that the different case studies cover a large period of time (from the 1920 to the post-war period), it would be interesting to read a final consideration of the outlined findings in relation to the development of visual style in British cinema with an outlook on the later periods.

Martina Moeller  
Université de Provence  
France