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Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, Cinephilia

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***Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, Cinephilia.* By Mattias Frey.** New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. 218 pp. \$90 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-85745-947-3.

German historical films of the recent past, specifically films that depict German twentieth-century history, have experienced worldwide success. Films such as *Good Bye Lenin*, (2003) and *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004) have consistently performed well in German and international movie theaters. *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (*Nowhere in Africa*, 2001), *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), and the Austrian co-production *Die Fälscher* (*The Counterfeiters*, 2007) all won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. These films have also received much critical attention from established film critics like Katja Nicodemus and Sylvia Nord, as well as from scholars such as Jennifer Kapczynski, Lutz Koepnick, and Marc Silberman. Termed “heritage films” by scholars and critics, the postwall wave of historical films tends to be seen as lacking a deeper engagement with the past, offering instead reverent appropriations of the past through “attempts at naïve material authenticity” (139). These films are most often criticized for their naïve engagement with national identity, ideology, and a tendency towards apologetic historicism. In his monograph, *Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, and Cinephilia*, Mattias Frey seeks to broaden this perception by discussing the recent wave of historical films in the wider context of film history and historiography. In his critical analysis of important examples of postwall German cinema, he establishes connections between current German historical films and classics of German and international film history and assesses how these contemporary historical films depart from previous paradigms.

With his book, Frey examines “how recent German historical film deploys constellations of film history to recreate the past,” in order to elucidate “the postwall German film historical imaginary” (7). In doing so, he intends to reveal German postwall attitudes to Germany’s twentieth century past. Over five chapters, Frey examines the historical and film historical contexts of seven films, following a chronological order in his arrangement of the chapters. These seven films are: *Das Wunder von Bern* (*The Miracle of Bern*, 2003), *Baader* (2002), *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (*The Baader Meinhof Complex*, 2008), *23* (1999), *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), and *Die Unberührbare* (*No Place to Go*, 2000). Out of these films, only two, namely *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* and *Die Unberührbare*, do not fit the mold of conservative aesthetics and high production values that, according to Frey, characterizes the German postwall historical film. Rather, these two films constitute critical engagements with the past as well as political commentary on the present. In the sixth chapter, Frey summarizes his findings in a discussion about the contemporary role of Germany’s twentieth century past in the millennial society and concludes that the postwall historical films are results of a new relationship with national history and a market-driven film industry. I find his discussions of *Das Wunder von Bern* and *Die Unberührbare* especially innovative and insightful, and my overview of these two chapters will stand as examples for his monograph overall.

In his discussion of *Das Wunder von Bern*, Frey examines how the film personalizes national history, in this case Germany’s surprise win of the 1954 soccer world cup, by connecting it to an emotionally-laden family story. He contrasts how the film’s employment of this narrative strategy in its benevolent attitude toward the early postwar years, especially toward the father generation returning from war, with the unforgiving attitude of the 1970s/80s New German

Cinema, which is apparent in films such as *Die bleierne Zeit* (*Marianne and Juliane*, 1982) or *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979). In these artistically ambitious and socially critical films, the 1950s are presented as a time “when [the] patriarchal structure from the Nazi period remained intact” (19). *Das Wunder von Bern*, by contrast, is empathetic to the homecoming father generation, exemplified in the film by the character of Richard Lubanski, “who returns home from war and tries in vain to reestablish his authority” (20). The audience is eventually led to empathize with Lubanski as he struggles to reconnect with his family and has to rethink his patriarchal values in the postwar society. In his analysis, Frey focuses on the prosthetic memory that he sees mythologizing “the restoration of a nuclear family as the rebirth of a nation” (21), while erasing “the subsequent traumatized recollection of the event” (ibid.). Frey thus argues that this film, like many postwall historical films, intends to recuperate the memory of contested periods of German twentieth century history.

Frey’s approach to seeing the film as a reflection on New German Cinema is especially successful when he compares the different ways in which Herbert Zimmermann’s iconic radio reportage of Germany’s win over Hungary in the final of the 1954 world-cup is employed differently in *Das Wunder von Bern* and the *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*. In *Das Wunder von Bern*, representative of postwall historical cinema, Zimmermann’s by now iconic play-by-play coverage of the last fifty seconds of the game is spoken by an actor visible in the film. This gives the audience visual pleasure by retroactively instating the radio reporter Zimmermann as a physical presence, akin to a TV presenter. The visually enhanced reportage furthermore functions to heighten the film’s apparent authenticity through the employment of shared cultural memory, while this memory at the same time offers a revision of the past by showing Zimmermann, where previously only his voice could be heard. By contrast, in *Die Ehe der Maria Braun*, a representative of New German Cinema, Zimmermann’s radio reportage is employed for a very different purpose. This film uses a melodramatic story about unfulfilled idealistic love and the necessity to arrange oneself with the materialistic realities of postwar Germany in order to cast a critical view on Germany’s postwar years. The radio reportage is employed at the ending of the film and is not the aural focus, but rather competes with dialog and other sound effects. This effect, which Frey labels a “multi-layered soundtrack” (40), creates chaos and discord instead of national unity as in *Das Wunder von Bern*. By comparing the different uses of Zimmermann’s reportage in those two films, Frey succinctly evokes the different intentions, historical circumstances, and interpretations of the past that are programmatic for New German Cinema and postwall German cinema.

Another interesting aspect which Frey could have explored in more depth in this chapter is his discussion of the similarities between the *Das Wunder von Bern* and *Das große Spiel* (*The Great Game*, 1942)—a soccer film from the Nazi period that similarly focuses on the uniting and exhilarating victory of a team of underdogs. According to Frey, that film, just like *Das Wunder von Bern*, painstakingly focuses on creating authenticity and using color “to create a utopian historicism.”(36) While Frey discusses this film mostly in regard to similarities in the use of color and narrative, it could also have productively extended his discussion of masculinity and the archetypical story of the underdog and its role in different political systems.

Die Unberührbare by contrast, does not belong to reverent mainstream postwall German cinema but is, in its socially critical attitude, reminiscent of New German Cinema, specifically

films by Helma Sanders-Brahms or Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The film juxtaposes the fall of the Berlin wall with the demise of the fictional West German novelist Hanna Flanders—a character based on the writer Gisela Elsner. Flanders, a writer of culturally critical literature that sympathizes with socialist values, senses that the end of socialist East Germany will mean the end of her writing career, falling into a deep depression as the historical reunification looms and eventually committing suicide in 1990. Although he acknowledges and engages with the film's connection to New German Cinema, in his analysis, Frey primarily explores the film's connection to film noir, not on a narrative level, but rather in its atmosphere of spatial anxiety. He argues that *Die Unberührbare* “attends to space and material culture in a way that is reminiscent of film noir and reinscribes both into the specific sociocultural environment of millennial Germany, another locus of great spatial and cultural transformation” (143). Frey notes how Hanna's paranoia and neurosis make her reminiscent of a noir character, akin to Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Desmond is a former silent film actress. Although past her prime, she is still convinced of her own importance and works on her next big project, delusional to the fact that it will never come to fruition. Starting from this observation, Frey expertly traces how *Die Unberührbare* employs film noir tropes and cinematography to visualize Hanna's disorientation and increasing anxiety. In doing so, he references the use of framing through windows to connote the characters' feeling of paranoia and the use of television as the sole locus of the fall of the Berlin wall. In the film, this historical event is only present in the background on TV screens, while Hanna's personal drama is the focus.

Especially interesting is Frey's analysis of Hanna's anxious and direction-less journey through Germany, where the film's spatial anxiety can be seen most clearly. Frey highlights how she only ever visits the periphery of well-known cities, avoiding the center. Instead of shots of iconic buildings and landmarks, the film shows her in “eerie and desolate” spaces that evoke Hanna's disoriented state of mind. Another important trait is the “sartorial intertextuality,” (151) which imbues objects of clothing with film historical significance. Hanna wears a coat that is reminiscent of a similar one in Fassbinder's *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (*Veronika Voss*, 1982), while her black wig is evocative of the main character in Sam Fuller's *The Naked Kiss* (1964). Frey concludes that this materiality constitutes an important connection to both film noir and New German Cinema, thus offering an alternative to the superficial striving for material authenticity that mainstream historical films such as *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) or *Sonnenallee* (1999) employ. Frey thus analyzes *Die Unberührbare* as containing the essence of film noir in its haunting depiction of spatial anxiety and disorientation, and he successfully presents it as an expression of that form's social critique.

In both of these chapters, Frey is particularly successful in situating these films into a film historical discourse and bringing out surprising connections that not only enrich his discussions of the films but also provide an understanding of the place and situation of German postwall historical films. I am concerned, however, with the title of the book and its implications for the films that Frey chose. I assume that by labeling recent, commercially successful German historical films with the broad term “postwall German cinema,” Frey intended to express the dominance of these films, both commercially and in public discourse. But although this type of film constitutes an important and widespread trend in recent German film production, it does not mean that all German films of the recent past belong to this category. The title of the book is too broadly anticipated and oversimplifies the landscape of recent German film production. Readers

should be aware that the book actually focuses on postwar historical films in particular. Altogether, however, the book is very well researched and offers a wealth of information that allows Frey to create new and insightful connections between these films and film history, and thus is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion about contemporary historical film.

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