

Anti-Heimat Cinema: The Jewish Invention of the German Landscape

By Ofer Ashkenazi. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 302. Cloth \$80.00. ISBN 978-0472132010.

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This book considers Jewish filmmakers who used their medium to address *Heimat*, a cluster of cultural images and values whose implication for German nationalism was that *Volk* had no place for Jews. Subtly or not, a *Heimat* film would convey the harmony of a charming village beneath a church steeple in a lovely, often Alpine setting, where no Jew was welcome. The filmmakers whom Ofer Ashkenazi studies saw “*Heimat* as a place that manifests and facilitates Jewish exclusion” (2), although some imagined its reconfiguration so that Jews could find a home. *Anti-Heimat Cinema* is a useful book. Biographical sketches of a few dozen filmmakers and thoughtful interpretations of a few dozen films make it a work that scholars will want close to hand. Moreover, its significance reaches beyond its modest title. Engaging film criticism, it also engages scholarship at the center of German cultural history, for example, David Blackburn on landscape, Alon Confino on the relationship of the local and the national, and Aleida Assmann on the meaning of cities. Especially crucial is Steven E. Aschheim’s idea of German-Jewish “co-constitution” of modern German culture (9). The filmmakers in question “infused mainstream culture with the ‘Jewish’ perspective of the outsider within” (39).

The book’s six chapters proceed chronologically from 1918 to 1968. Chapter 1 discusses *Meyer aus Berlin* (*Meyer from Berlin*, 1918) by Ernst Lubitsch, whose version of *Heimat* included “German-Jewish encounters, cohabitation, and self-perceptions” (37). The next chapter considers early Weimar films that question the harmony of the classic *Heimat* or put forth the city as an alternative *Heimat*, as in Ewald Dupont’s *Das alte Gesetz* (*The Old Law*, 1923), an “urban fantasy of acculturation” (69). Its main character, a Jewish actor, is at home in shtetl and city alike.

Chapter 3 expands in several directions to consider imprints of the modernist fascination with machinery on *Heimat* films and address “the Weimar legacy” in exile. Ashkenazi follows Helmar Lerski, a widely experienced cinematographer in 1920s Berlin, to 1930s Palestine. There, Lerski directed films, including *Avodah* (*Work*, 1935), which seemingly affirms the claim that in Palestine “the pioneers are in the place where they belong, their *Heimat*” (100). Ashkenazi has a different reading. The classic German *Heimat* film established coherence of place to suggest a harmonious community, while Lerski, a Jewish exile adept in yet critical of the German genre, offers “an assortment of . . . fragmented landscapes rather than a unified ‘metaphor’ for a homogenous *Volk*” (101).

The next two chapters examine the contribution of returning exiles to German cinema in the postwar era. Aware that Nazi cinema had appropriated *Heimat* imagery, many of these Jewish filmmakers “employed . . . *Heimat* iconography as a visual metaphor for Nazism . . .” (115). Ashkenazi extensively analyzes *Die goldene Pest* (*The Golden Plague*, 1954) by John Brahm, who had worked in Hollywood as a director for Twentieth Century Fox. Drawing on Maria Höhn and others, Ashkenazi explains that the “golden plague” signified the alarm of conservative Germans that US occupation forces were undermining German morality, particularly among young women. The presumption was that this morality remained intact under the Nazis. The subtext was racism, as Black G.I.s were represented as the main offenders and Jews as owners of clubs that encouraged moral laxity. Ashkenazi acknowledges that contemporary reviewers, and subsequently scholars too, have read the film as an articulation of this anxiety. However, in his interpretation, *Heimat* is wrecked not only by malignant outsiders, but by its own hypocrisy; Brahm imbued *Die goldene Pest* with “‘Jewish’ experiences and perspectives alongside . . . the cinematic imagery” (127).

Other returning exiles revisited the city as a possible Heimat for German Jews. Imo Moszkowicz, an Auschwitz survivor, displayed in *Es war mir ein Vergnügen* (*It Was a Pleasure*, 1963) a “rebuilt urban topography” (158) as the site where German-Jewish symbiosis was conceivable. Other films lacked such optimism. Fred Zinnemann, who was becoming a celebrated Hollywood director, returned to Germany to make *The Search* (1948), which focuses on a boy, clearly a Jewish survivor, alone in an unnamed German city. Zinnemann himself had lost his parents in the Holocaust. Of particular interest to Ashkenazi is the fact that before his move to the United States in 1929, Zinnemann had worked with the German-Jewish filmmakers who created the influential *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1929–1930), with its “idealization of the urban Heimat” (147). No such idealization affects *The Search*. Rather, shots of ruins establish the bleakness of the city. These awful “cityscapes [are] the aftermath of Heimat” (146).

Ashkenazi’s final chapter shifts from the Federal Republic to the German Democratic Republic. Highlighted are several films by Konrad Wolf, who returned to Germany from the Soviet Union as a soldier in the Red Army. He, like many returning Jews whose support for communism led to “the atheist-socialist GDR” (166), did not linger on the problem of Jewish belonging. However, his films, which generally emphasize the replacement of Heimat by a community of common adherence to socialist ideology, introduce characters who, still searching for this community, suffer from alienation. His autobiographical *Ich war neunzehn* (*I was nineteen*, 1968) depicts a German member of the Red Army, such as Wolf had been, on German soil at the end of the war. The character encounters Germans in various situations, and thus “the film considers different models of German identity, following major trends in the postwar German and German-Jewish identity discourse” (185). The second model is that of belonging to Germany via admiration of its music and literature; the main character shouts “Stop it!” (186) at a friend who quotes Heine. In the end, the film rejects every possibility of Heimat, the discredited realm of the *Volk*. Only victory and the embrace of communist ideals lay the foundation for being German.

Ashkenazi is careful not to suggest that anti-Heimat cinema encompasses the entire discourse of German-Jewish identity, mentioning, among others, Arnold Zweig, for whom the Jew as *Heimatlos*, a wanderer, could conciliate national positions tending to isolation. The book is rich in its awareness that films resonate with and allude to other films. It also connects film with other media, asserting, for example, that imagery in *Ich war neunzehn* “unmistakably resembles” (162) a Caspar David Friedrich painting, or interpreting a scene in *Meyer aus Berlin* as a parody of a nineteenth-century poem. All told a very worthwhile book.

doi:10.1017/S0008938921001631

Modern Lusts: Ernest Borneman – Jazz Critic, Filmmaker, Sexologist

By Detlef Siegfried. Translated by Noah Harley and Jennifer Neuheiser. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2020. Pp. 352. Cloth \$149.00. ISBN 978-1789202885.

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Ernest Borneman’s career rightly gives scholars chills of fascination. Detlef Siegfried’s page-turner of a scholarly biography does full justice to the extraordinary embranchments of