PROJECT MUSE®

Austrian Cinema: A History (review)

Gerd Gemünden

Monatshefte, Volume 99, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 131-133 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mon.2007.0007>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212805>

doch fragt, ob darin der subversive Überschuß etwa einiger Dramen des späten Lessing oder des Sturm und Drang tatsächlich zu fassen ist.

Im "Theater des Lebens" um 1900 sucht von Herrmann die Diskurse von "Kinematographie," "Verwandlung" und "Biopolitik" zu (re-)konstruieren, in die auch die Programmschriften der bekannten Theaterreformer (etwa Georg Fuchs, Peter Behrens, E.G. Craig und anderer) für ein neues nicht-literarisches Theater gehören. Hier greift der Autor auf die Bühnen des Wissens von Psychophysik, Neurophysiologie, Experimental- und Ingenieurwissenschaften oder Kinematographie zurück, die zeitlich parallel zu finden sind und auf denen auch das Sprechen *über* und das Machen *von* Theater stehen. So entwirft er etwa unter der Überschrift "Kinematographie" ein Feld von Bewegungsstudien, das von Kleists Marionettentheater-Aufsatz über Webers "Mechanik der menschlichen Gehwerkzeuge" (1836), Muybridges und Mareys Bewegungsaufzeichnungen, einer Studie über Beinprothesen (die nach den zahlreichen Kriegen 1881 dringlich wurde) bis hin zu Taylors und Gilbreths Bewegungs- und Zeitstudien reicht und schließlich an Oskar Schlemmers "Gestentanz" und Brechts Geste als V-Effekt grenzt. Oder er zeichnet einen Diskurs der "Verwandlung," in dem er zum einen die "Tanzwut" neben die bekannte Hysterie als "Volkskrankheit" der Zeit plazierte, zum anderen den Übergang des Theaters vom sprachlich-psychologischen in das physikalisch-physiologische Konzept der Erregungsübertragung deutlich macht. Das alles liest sich sehr einleuchtend und es ist ein Vergnügen nachzuvollziehen, wie hier eine Kunst- oder Geisteswissenschaft aufbricht in den Raum der sogenannten "exakten" Natur- und Technikwissenschaften.

Am Beginn der Theaterwissenschaft geht von Herrmann drei Varianten ihrer frühen Konkretisierungen nach: den Studien Max Herrmanns, der Theater als "Raumkunst" betrachtet, den Arbeiten Arthur Kutschers, der sie als "Ausdruckskunst" sieht und (zunächst) auf der Dichtung als Ausgangspunkt der Tätigkeit des Regisseurs beharrt, und Hermann Reichs entwicklungsgeschichtlichem Versuch einer Kulturgeschichte des Mimus. Es ist schade, daß uns der Autor in diesem letzten Teil die Rückbindung an die zuvor gehobenen Fundstücke und Fundorte einer Archäologie des Theaters ein wenig schuldig bleibt. Insgesamt aber handelt es sich um ein überaus interessantes und anregendes Buch, das bekannte Texte auf neue Befunde hin liest, neue Texte zu heben versteht und zeigt, wie übergreifend die Diskurse unter einer kulturgeschichtlichen Optik sind.

Fachhochschule Osnabrück

—Marianne Streisand

Austrian Cinema: A History.

By Robert von Dassanowsky. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005. vi + 322 pages. \$65.00.

In the preface to *Austrian Cinema: A History*, Robert von Dassanowsky cites film historian Frieda Grafe who described Austrian film history as a phantasm, because it is not connected to a certain place. There is indeed a remarkable discrepancy between the impressive film professionals this country has produced—directors like Josef von Sternberg or Fritz Lang, stars like Hedy Lamarr or Arnold Schwarzenegger, screenwriters like Carl Mayer, and cinematographers like Franz Planer—and the perception

that the country lacks a coherent Austrian national cinema. This discrepancy has to do with the dramatic geographical and political changes the country underwent during the last one hundred years, turning the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire into a much smaller Republic that was swallowed by Nazi Germany in 1938 and not reconstituted as a Republic until 1955. Only during the last decade, with the disappearance of the Iron Curtain and Austria's membership in the European Union, has the country reinvented itself. From a neutral but isolated Alpine Republic it has evolved into a nation that is at the forefront of East and West European exchange, advocating a new Central European identity in an increasingly global world. The discrepancy also has to do with the fact that, because of its history, Austrian-born film professionals were always already international players with multi-ethnic backgrounds who seamlessly fit into the many national film industries in which they sought employment—foremost that of Germany, but also England, France, and the United States. As a result, there is a strong Austrian component in the cinema of Weimar Germany and the Hollywood of the classic studio era, but no national cinema that could rival most of its Western European neighbors.

Robert von Dassanowsky's new study of Austrian cinema is fully aware of the complexities the nation's history poses to an understanding of its cinema as a national cinema. The purpose of the study, which can claim to be the first of its kind in English, is to trace the historical development of that cinema from its beginnings to the present and to sketch its contours. Inherent to this project is also the dismantling of stereotypes that have marred the reception of Austrian films outside the country—of being too schmaltsy, too bombastic, too nostalgic, and ultimately too parochial. *Austrian Cinema* opens with a chapter entitled "Schein und Sein," exploring the central trope of make-believe that underscores the Danube monarchy's affinity to the Baroque as it informs the trajectory from the first steps of the new medium to the end of the silent era. Particular attention is paid to the "father" of the Austrian film industry, Alexander von Kolowrat-Krakowsky, to producers like Louise and Anton Kolm and their partner Jakob Fleck, to genres such as the socially critical melodrama, and to the beginnings of directors like Robert Wiene and Gustav Ucicky who would rise to fame outside their native country.

If the first chapter sets its caesura with the dramatic transformation of the industry brought on by sound, the second chapter follows political determinants, stretching from 1929 until 1938 when the country disappeared from the map. The decade is shaped by the "Viennese Film," a genre distinctly Austrian in sensibility, that was created in no small measure by Willi Forst. With the so-called *Anschluß*, Austrian productions, which had already been influenced and infiltrated by Nazi politics since 1933, came under the control of the Reich's Film Chamber, with Wien-Film becoming the centralized production unit that was to cash in on the popularity of the Viennese film. Costume dramas, romances, and escapist fantasies proved highly compatible with Joseph Goebbels's own understanding of the significance of film industry for entertaining the masses.

The postwar years and the 1950s were a time when Austria—like Germany—did little to produce internationally significant directors or introduce stylistic innovations, but films enjoyed strong domestic success through popular genres (including the *Heimatfilm*) and the perennial appeal of stars such as Hans Moser, Paul Hörbiger, and Paula Wessely, as well as a young and exceptional Romy Schneider. With the rise

of television in the 1960s, popular cinema faced a crisis, but unlike in other Western European countries, this did not lead to the emergence of a significant art cinema in Austria. Von Dassanowsky appropriately labels the period from 1960 to 1979 “The Missed Wave,” a drab period of Austrian filmmaking whose only highlight is the emergence of a small but prolific group of avant-garde and experimental filmmakers. As the turning point he identifies the Film Promotion Act of 1980, which established public subsidies that had proven essential for West Germany’s New German Cinema in the previous decade, and thus made possible again an artistically ambitious cinema with more than just domestic appeal. Austrian cinema’s strongest decade in many has been the most recent one, regaining international recognition through the films of Michael Haneke, Stefan Ruzowitzky, Ulrich Seidl, and Barbara Albert.

Von Dassanowsky’s overview is panoramic, providing a wealth of information about dominant styles, narrative conventions, genres, and the individual careers of directors and actors and actresses of over one hundred years of filmmaking. With his own background in producing, he is attentive to how production circumstances can shape the look and meaning of films in often more significant ways than single individuals. But rarely does he contextualize developments in a larger theoretical framework, and rarely does he swoop down to give a more detailed analysis of an individual film (noticeable exceptions are extended discussions of *Die Siebtelbauern* or *Funny Games*). For the most part, individual chapters chart a chronological course made up of long list of films, which are discussed with attention to plots, stars and genres, but without the synthesizing effort that comparable volumes on German or French national cinema offer. Particularly the chapter on postwar filmmaking, with references to well over one hundred films—few of them with true artistic merits—makes for tough reading. Von Dassanowsky’s extensive archival research presents many true discoveries, making the volume a first-rate reference book to consult on certain periods or individuals, but ultimately not a book easily read cover to cover.

Dartmouth College

—Gerd Gemünden