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Austria Made in Hollywood by Jacqueline Vansant (review)

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(Review)

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Austria Made in Hollywood. By Jacqueline Vansant. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2019. Pp. xii + 196. Cloth \$90.00. ISBN 978-1571139450.

Do Hollywood films set in Austria tell us more about Austria or about Hollywood? Drawing on Siegfried Kracauer's 1949 essay "National Types as Hollywood Presents Them" and its distinction between portraits and projections on-screen, Jacqueline Vansant comes down decisively on the side of projections (3). While certainly not denying some role to events in Europe and efforts to portray them in shaping filmic depictions of Austria, Vansant argues convincingly that these films are best interpreted in light of their American contexts. She surveys dozens of films, primarily from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, showing how, "Set in an imagined Austria, tied to American fantasies, and shaped by an American reality, the films contain embedded messages on changing American mores and gender relationships" (19).

The book's most important contribution is doubtless its encyclopedic review of the surprisingly large number of Hollywood films set in Austria, and especially Vienna, during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, we find the old imperial capital appearing time and again as the city of waltzes and trysts. The "Red Vienna," which actually existed when these films were produced, is entirely eclipsed by what Kracauer termed the "retrospective utopia" of "Gay Vienna" (4). Then, with the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, Austria became a locus for imagining an alternative to German politics. Viewed from the perspective of European events, the contrast is bizarre, since Austria was under its own fascist regime at the time, but Vansant shows how the imagined Austria provided an opportunity for Hollywood filmmakers to push US entrance into the war without running afoul of isolationists in Congress. Once the US had entered the war, depictions of Austria correspondingly changed and, for the first time, focused primarily on roughly contemporaneous events, with the Anschluss being relitigated on-screen, and not infrequently in ways that portrayed Austria as victim. This is an idea which would persist into the most familiar Hollywood Austria movie, *The Sound of Music*, and Vansant's command of the history of Austria on-screen allows her to show how this revisionist romanticism had already been rehearsed in scarcely remembered films like 1941's *They Dare Not Love* (108).

While Vansant's focus on the American context occasionally appears little more than a narrative principle under which to organize the dizzying number of readings she carries out, it can also serve to revise older readings. In a chapter on Erich Stroheim, we thus find Vansant reading the Viennese-born filmmaker's two Vienna films, *Merry-Go-Round* (1923) and *The Wedding March* (1928), less as reflections of his own complex relationship with Austria—he left the empire in 1909 as the son of Jewish parents and introduced himself to Hollywood as a minor member of that empire's

by then defunct Catholic nobility (Erich *von* Stroheim)—than as commentaries on contemporary America. It is only by suppressing the dominant readings of Stroheim's work that Vansant is able to find "how the films weigh in on contemporary discussions on marriage, money, sex, and love" (24).

At its strongest, Vansant's argument takes on a new historicist verve, revealing striking harmonies between Austrian stories and discourses of the contemporary United States. Stuart Walker's 1932 *Evenings for Sale*, a film in which a wealthy American widow travels to 1920s Vienna in search of operetta-inspired romance and finds herself connected to an erstwhile Austrian aristocrat now working as a sort of gigolo, becomes for Vansant a commentary on the connection between work and dignity. The fallen Austrian count "proves again and again that a man's value depends on his character and not his position," turning a narrative of European high culture into a palliative for the American working class during the Depression (45). In another particularly strong reading, Vansant shows how Michael Curtiz's 1960 *A Breath of Scandal* reworks Ferenc Molnár's play *Olympia* by tying the discourse around the recently published Kinsey reports together with Cold War rhetoric to tell a story of (nuclear) containment of female sexuality.

It is probably impossible to write a book about Austria and Hollywood without including *The Sound of Music*, but its inclusion represents a weakness in this study, rehashing well-traversed terrain rather than offering fresh insights. It is, moreover, a little surprising that this film had to be included, when one considers a number of films that are disregarded. While Vansant explains her omission of Carol Reed's 1949 *The Third Man* (Austria, to be sure, but not made in Hollywood) and Wes Anderson's 2014 *Grand Budapest Hotel* (based on Stefan Zweig, but not really set in Austria), it seems rather surprising that very well-known and clearly set-in-Austria films like *Amadeus* (Milos Forman, 1984) or *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995) receive no more than a paragraph in the introductory survey of films. Vansant seems to consider these films to be isolated moments, rather than part of a history of films set in Austria, a history which had already begun to abate in the late 1940s, as is clear from the exhaustive and extremely helpful tables of films offered as an appendix. Still, a book called *Austria Made in Hollywood* that discusses films mainly set in Vienna and made between the 1920s and 1950s seems perhaps mistitled.

As a rich source of information on often forgotten celluloid depictions of Austria, this book will be of value to scholars of Austria, and its careful readings of shifting Hollywood depictions of a single subject will make it of interest to many film scholars as well.

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