
Joel Westerdale

Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies, Volume 52, Number 1, February 2016, pp. 88-91 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press

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Romanès and therefore adopt a phrasing and style that are specific to the community’s idiom. Interference and language transfer are thus relatively common and should be viewed with regard to their aesthetic effects.

As French puts it in her conclusion, Romani literatures present us with valuable points of view and insights. Academic studies may elaborate the divergences and convergences of Romani literatures and thus contribute to introducing its value to the larger public. We may therefore hope that still more scholars will seize the opportunity to listen to the many Romani literary voices.

JULIA BLANDFORT Jade Hochschule Wilhelmshaven

Note


The quandary is a familiar one: how to account for an admirably innovative artist who comes to collaborate with an abhorrent totalitarian regime. Michael Cowan’s new book calls this the “Mephisto question,” and it has long plagued scholarship on the German film pioneer Walter Ruttmann (1887–1941). Ruttmann’s early films are widely recognized as milestones in modernist filmmaking, with works like the documentary montage *Berlin. Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927) and the experimental animations of the *Opus* films (1921–25) fixed securely in the canon of early avant-garde cinema. On the other hand, his later documentaries, with such titles as *Blut und Boden. Grundlagen zum neuen Reich* (1933) and
Deutsche Waffenschmieden (1939), rarely receive mention beyond the obligatory acknowledgement that, alas, the filmmaker’s considerable talents were ultimately assimilated by the Nazi propaganda machine. Ruttmann’s later works are thus bracketed as an embarrassing aberration from the sovereign artistic expression of the auteur’s earlier career. Sympathetic attempts to redeem Ruttmann may seek to tease out points of resistance in the films commissioned under the Nazis, while less apologetic interpretations may identify Fascist tendencies in the earlier, more experimental works, but neither approach is particularly compelling.

Bypassing the conventional narrative of avant-gardist gone astray, Cowan’s portrayal of Ruttmann forgoes the image of the autonomous auteur on which these conventional narratives of redemption or condemnation rely. Doing so enables Cowan to provide a novel – and perhaps model – response to the recurring “Mephisto question.”

This is the first monograph in English or German devoted exclusively to Ruttmann’s films, and while each individual chapter is worthy of reading in isolation, the book as a whole coheres in a compelling, unified argument. Cowan traces four stations of Ruttmann’s career: (1) the early “absolute” film experiments and his work in early film advertising; (2) the “cross-section” films of the late 1920s, like Berlin and Melodie der Welt; (3) the hygiene and medical Kulturfilme of the early 1930s; and (4) the industrial and propaganda films made after 1933. Through eye-opening historical contextualization and penetrating interpretations of individual films, Cowan produces a narrative of subtle developments rather than stark ruptures, examining the changes in Ruttmann’s work while revealing a dominant continuity. This continuity is derived not from an auteur’s artistic genius but from the commissioned filmmaker’s expertise. From very early on, Ruttmann’s films were almost exclusively commissioned works, and sponsors sought him out precisely for his expertise in film and its effects on spectators. This characterization of the filmmaker may not redeem him from the criticisms of collaboration or, at best, indifference, but it does recast the discussion of Ruttmann’s films in a way that moves beyond questions of culpability and enables deeper analysis of his formal and technical innovations, as well as encouraging a more thorough understanding of the discursive and cultural contexts of his works.

Throughout his career, Ruttmann’s films are driven by their application, whether as an instrument for selling tires or for conceptually ordering the multiplicity of modern society, or as a means of circulating biopolitical prescriptions and shaping the self-understanding of the Volk. Cowan argues compellingly that even the early Opus films emerged less from an interest in “absolute” art than from an occupation with the psychophysics of film, an issue that Cowan demonstrates was frequently discussed in advertising trade journals of the period. Subsequent work in film advertising, particularly with Julius Pinschewer, continued Ruttmann’s exploration into the psychophysical power of rhythmic movement in film and helped to situate him as an expert on filmic effects. This expertise manifested itself again in what Cowan dubs Ruttmann’s “cross-section films” (Querschnittfilme). Comparable to Walter Benjamin’s Passagenwerk or Aby Warburg’s
Mnemosyne Atlas, this new genre of Kulturfilm provides a cross-sectional analysis of society that subjects inherently contingent photographic images to the schematic structuring of absolute film. These films emulate the cross-section in order to manage the flood of photographic images to which the modern subject is exposed, enabling the spectator to navigate the world with an eye to both its statistical regularities and its inherent multiplicity. Refreshingly, Cowan focuses his discussion on the hitherto largely neglected Melodie der Welt (1929), but it is clear how his analysis could lead to novel readings of the far more frequently discussed Berlin.

From the “statistical montage” of the cross-section film Ruttmann would move to the biopolitical intervention of the “public hygiene” film. At the intersection of avant-garde and medical-social reform, commissioned films like Feind im Blut (1931), a cautionary account of syphilis, took on a didactic function lacking in the earlier works. Through overt use of statistics, animated graphics, appeals to “professionals,” and evidentiary editing, these films helped spectators to situate themselves within the larger statistical populace and modify their behaviour accordingly. Such a strategy parses differently under the Nazis, however, argues Cowan. Whereas the earlier hygiene films muster statistics to prescribe action based on spectator self-interest, the documentaries Ruttmann would make under the Nazis employ statistics to prescribe how individuals should act in the interest of the Volk. The spectator is interpellated as a part of the Volkskörper, for which difference and contingency are not simply an aspect of modern society to be managed but a contamination to be eliminated. The health of the individual at the centre of the hygiene films gives way to concern for the health of the race.

Likewise, the connection to, and yet difference from, Ruttmann’s earlier work becomes apparent in the 1935 city symphony Stuttgart, a didactic film that presents Germany as an ethnic community (Volksgemeinschaft) unified by blood. Thus understood, these films do more than simply provide a means of grappling with the multiplicity of modern society; they actively contribute to the Nazi ambition of eliminating difference and transforming the masses into a monolithic Volk. Films like Metall des Himmels and Deutsche Panzer, furthermore, suggest a purpose for this Volk, namely war.

Bracketing any opposition of art and commerce, Cowan’s exemplary study follows in the vein of Andreas Huyssen, Malte Hagener, and Thomas Elsaesser to examine sponsored films not only in their political and artistic context but also in the context of their commissioning. While Cowan provides some fresh readings of the materials readily available in Jeanpaul Goergen’s Walter Ruttmann. Eine Dokumentation,1 he goes well beyond this to introduce new primary materials on sponsored films (advertising, industrial, educational, public service, management, instructional), as well as new resources to shed light on these films, such as trade publications and specialty journals (e.g. Die Reklame, Seidels Reklame, and Industrielle Psychotechnik) and contemporary studies (e.g. Karl Bücher’s Arbeit und Rhythmus). He expands Gilles Deleuze’s typology of images to include a “management image” (20), providing a theoretical surplus that invites application beyond the current subset of films, for Ruttmann is certainly not
the only person to employ film as a means for regulating multiplicity and perception, training spectator attention, and managing populations. With its interweaving of film, psychophysics, statistics, advertising, public health, and national identity, the book offers much for students and scholars of film, media, and mass culture. Of particular interest to scholars of German is the manner in which Cowan negotiates the “Mephisto question.” This is not a biography of a man but of a career, and as such it sidesteps the question by bracketing the morally accountable agent. In emphasizing Ruttmann’s role as an expert, as opposed to an auteur, the book nevertheless does not dispel Kracauer’s criticism of Ruttmann’s “indifference” (179) – nor does it claim to. What it does, however, is enable the reader to focus on the films themselves and the context of their emergence, and to benefit from Cowan’s innovative research, compelling interpretations, and lucid argumentation.

JOEL WESTERDALE Smith College

Note


Axel Bangert argues that German film after 1990 “discovered the experiential dimension of the Nazi past” (2) that had been missing in the more distanced perspective of pre-1990 (West) German cinema. This book situates post-1990 (re-)unified cinema as a central participant in the thorny debates surrounding the unified nation’s understanding of the Third Reich. The title of the book refers to German film, but Bangert doesn’t limit his study to the big screen, offering television films, documentaries, and miniseries equal-opportunity interpretation: Anonyma; Dresden; Die Flucht; Die Gustloff; Im toten Winkel; Napol; Sophie Scholl – die letzten Tage; Speer und Er; Stalingrad (both the Knopp and Vilsmaier films); Unkenrufe: Zeit der Versöhnung; Der Untergang; and Wolfskinder are among the films that receive critical attention in this book.

Bangert relies on the concept of experience developed by Thomas Elsaesser, who in turn leans on Walter Benjamin’s distinctions between Erlebnis and Erfahrung, the former being incomplete sensation, the latter complete (or at least consistent) knowledge. The first three chapters deal with aspects of Erlebnis, most notably shame and the private past in chapter 1, the “intimate experience of seduction” (55) as it pertains to Nazism (both its leading figures and its ideals) in