

Opulent, but flawed

The Manns: a Novel of a Century

Stefan Steinberg
27 December 2001

The German television director Heinrich Breloer has made a series of three television programmes examining the history of Germany's most celebrated literary family—the Manns. No other family so dominated modern German literature as the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann, who produced some of the most outstanding and enduring novels of the twentieth century. Thomas Mann's son, Klaus, was also an outstanding novelist and daughter Erika, as well as being a gifted writer, also played a leading role in the anti-fascist cabaret troupe *Peppermill*.

In his new series, *The Manns: a Novel of a Century* (*Die Manns: Ein Jahrhundertroman*), which runs more than five hours in total, Breloer employs a technique which he developed in previous films, notably *Todesspiel* (*Death-game* 1997), which dealt with the repercussions for German society of Red Army Faction terrorism during the so-called "German autumn" of 1977. Breloer mixes feature film with documentary footage and interviews with real figures who are pertinent to the film's story. For his production of *The Manns* Breloer has recruited some of Germany's very best actors and actresses, including Armin Mueller-Stahl in the role of Thomas Mann. Breloer's most prominent interview partner in the series is Elizabeth Mann—the only surviving daughter of Thomas Mann.

Original locations have been used whenever possible and it is evident that a great deal of work, considerable expense and careful editing have been expended on the project. According to production notes, the film team viewed 245 hours of documentary material before selecting a tiny percentage to be shown. Equally, Breloer clearly knows his material. In interviews he explains that the life and work of the Manns—in particular, Thomas Mann—has been a lifelong preoccupation. In 1983 he completed a documentary film on the life of Klaus Mann.

The first part of the series begins in 1923 and concerns the life of the Mann family in their family residence in München during the decade in which Hitler's NSDAP came to power. The second part deals with the exile of the Manns in Switzerland and then America, following the Nazi takeover in 1933. The third and final part deals with the final years of the Manns' exile in post-war America and the family's eventual return to Europe (Switzerland) after the Second World War.

Despite the opulence of the production, the considerable work invested, and notwithstanding the fact that the film shows some of the crucial political turning points in the career of Thomas Mann, the series prefers to linger on the more sensational aspects of the family's undoubtedly remarkable history. As a result Breloer's work fails to provide any profound insight into the significance of the artistic work of the film's main character—Thomas Mann, the author of *Buddenbrooks*, *Death in Venice* and *Doctor Faustus*, among others.

Breloer has studied Thomas Mann's personal diaries, first published 100 years after his birth in 1975. Together with mundane daily accounts of his ills and ailments, Mann's diaries also throw new light on his private thoughts and concerns.

For many devotees of Thomas Mann, the remarks and comments he

made in his diaries indicating a life-long preoccupation with homoerotic tendencies were a revelation. There is no doubt that a glimpse into the hitherto closed world of Thomas's sexual inclinations illuminates various aspects of his work, i.e., the yearning of the ageing and dying artist Gustav von Aschenbach for the Adonis-like youth Tadzio in *Death in Venice*, but unfortunately and predictably, in the current climate where radicalism in art is invariably limited to the sphere of sex, Breloer devotes too much attention to the issue of Thomas Mann's suppressed homoerotic tendencies. In the first part there is no lack of scenes intimating Mann's secret. The camera lingers over the youthful form of a young, nubile male statue which Thomas Mann kept in his garden. Far more fundamental issues which help explain the dynamism and relevance of Mann's work are ignored.

We witness the decline into drug addiction and eventual suicide of Klaus Mann shortly after the end of the Second World War and later in the series we witness the tragic end of Heinrich Mann's proletarian and younger wife Nelly, whose flamboyance, bluntness and promiscuity was a thorn in the side of the more rigid and bourgeois correct Thomas Mann. The weight given in the series to the loves, suicides and deaths of the family have led some commentators, who incidentally responded positively to Breloer's work, to comment that at last Germany had its equivalent of the American "Kennedy clan."

In reality, to draw a parallel between the dynasty of opportunistic businessmen and politicians constituting the Kennedy family and Germany's most prominent literary family is absurd, but the evocation of such comparisons points to some of the weaknesses of Breloer's portrayal.

By commencing well into the twentieth century, in 1923, when Thomas Mann is already 47, the series takes up the family/literary story at a point when Mann's shift from his original national-conservative roots towards an embrace of democratic ideals is already well under way. Thomas Mann's fervent support for German nationalism and the First World War brought him into years of bitter conflict with his brother Heinrich as well as a generation of left-leaning artists (Bertolt Brecht, Alfred Döblin). But this entire period, spanning nearly a decade, is dealt with in a brief comment in an interview with Elizabeth: "Throughout the entire conflict between the two brothers it was basically Heinrich who was always right, and it was my father who was forced to back down because he had gone off on a wrong track. Not Heinrich. Heinrich was always European and democratic and defended western culture. And my father, after all, was a nationalist."

In terms of their ideological and artistic roots, the Mann brothers—the sons of a leading Lübeck trader—were shaped and influenced by the prevailing ideas circulating amongst prominent layers of the new aspiring bourgeoisie in Germany towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thomas Mann's wrote: "Romanticism, nationalism, Burgerdom, music, pessimism, humour—these are the atmospheric elements of the past century which in the main form the non-personal constituents of my make-

up.”

Thomas Mann’s most important ideological influences were Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner. As a relatively young man, Thomas spoke of Friedrich Nietzsche as his “guide and master” and at the same time as “the most incomparably greatest and most astute psychologist of decadence.” As a young man elder brother Heinrich shared Thomas’ enthusiasm for Nietzsche, but adopted far earlier a critical standpoint towards the “philosopher of decadence.”

Enjoying a classical bourgeois education, the Manns were schooled and also profoundly influenced by the humanist and universalist tradition linked with the outstanding German poets and writers of the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries—Goethe, Lessing, Schiller. As a writer Thomas Mann avidly read the work of great Russian authors such as Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, as well as the French realist authors of the nineteenth century. He was also greatly indebted to the work of novelist Theodor Fontane (*Effi Briest*). Seeking to transfer the realist mode of literature to German soil, he rejected the naturalism associated with figures such as Gerhard Hauptmann. The novel, he said, must be the place for the exposition of ideas: “There is no better way of elevating the novel than by making it into a construct which contains ideas.”

Of all these figures and sources only Goethe is briefly mentioned in connection with the work of the Manns in the course of over five hours of film.

Central philosophical and aesthetic issues raised by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche reoccur continually in Thomas Mann’s work. Indeed the central character of Thomas Mann’s last complete novel, *Dr. Faustus*, is loosely based on the figure of Nietzsche. In common with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Thomas Mann repeatedly returned in his books to the issue of artistic creativity, posing the question—to what extent was artistic originality compatible with civilisation and democracy?

At the same time, Mann long shared the viewpoint of the two German philosophers, expressed most directly by Nietzsche in *Gottterdammerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), that physical decline and decay induces, through sublimation, an increase in refinement and aesthetic sensibility. In his preoccupation with German decadence, Thomas Mann repeatedly evokes the spread of disease in his novels: Hanno’s terminal illness in Mann’s first long novel *Buddenbrooks*; the tuberculosis which undermines willpower at the same time as empowering the imagination of the main character in *Magic Mountain*; the outbreak of cholera in the old, decaying city of Venice in *Death in Venice* (the novel’s central figure Gustav von Aschenbach prefers to stay in the city and await inevitable death so long as he can behold his icon of beauty, the young Tadzio). And finally, Adrian Leverkühn, described by Thomas Mann as the “the most German of German composers,” plagued with syphilis in *Dr. Faustus*.

The Mann family did not operate in a political vacuum. Far from it. Heinrich and Thomas Mann were born around the time of German unification (1871 and 1875, respectively); their lives would span two world wars and the rise and fall of fascism. For an artist of the sensitivity of Thomas Mann it was impossible for such events not to find a reflection in his work. He concedes that he came to politics because of the threat posed by National Socialism. His political trajectory from national conservatism—most clearly expressed in his *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* published in 1918—to what he himself later describes as a form of “militant humanism,” is perhaps most directly articulated through the mouth of the narrator Zeitbloom in *Dr. Faustus*, who ironically refers in this passage to Hitler and Mussolini as the “saviours of European civilisation”:

“As a moderate man and son of culture I have indeed a natural horror of radical revolution and the dictatorship of the lower classes, which I find it hard, owing to my tradition, to envisage as otherwise than in the imagery of anarchy and mob rule—in short in the destruction of culture. But when I

recall the grotesque anecdote about the two saviours of European civilisation, the German and the Italian, both of them in the pay of finance capital, walking through the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, where they certainly did not belong, and one of them saying to the other that all these “glorious art treasures” would have been destroyed by Bolshevism if heaven had not prevented it by raising them up—when I recall all of this, then my notions about masses take on another colour, and the dictatorship of the proletariat begins to seem to me, a German burgher, an ideal situation compared with the now possible one of the dictatorship of the scum of the earth. Bolshevism to my knowledge has never destroyed any works of art” (*Dr. Faustus*).

In fact Thomas Mann never espoused Bolshevism, and, writing in the mid-forties, Mann is far too generous to the Stalinist regime, which had usurped the progressive cultural tradition of genuine Bolshevism and was indeed responsible for the *destruction* of many artists and works of art. Nevertheless, the passage is a typically honest appraisal by Mann of his own development. Such passages, incidentally, were used by FBI to persecute Mann as a “communist sympathiser” during his American exile.

Thomas Mann argued for the novel as “a construct containing ideas”. Breloer’s television version of the life of the Mann family fails because it evades confronting the ideas which so powerfully shaped the lives of the Manns and which were to play such a dramatic and tragic role in the twentieth century.

At the same time, in failing to deal with the profoundly reactionary ideas associated with such names as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, ideas which motivated the young Thomas Mann, Breloer’s film assists a contemporary layer of historians and academics who seek to smooth over the contradictions and turbulence bound up with the late historical development of German capitalism. Breloer’s overly tolerant and humanist Mann, seen through the eyes of his favourite daughter, Elizabeth, can then easily be turned into a role model demonstrating the vitality of German democracy in the struggle against fascism.

The reality is more complicated, and the most effective argument against such a conclusion is contained in the work of the Manns themselves. The novels of Thomas and Heinrich Mann (in particular the latter’s *Man of Straw*, 1918), refracted through the ideological influences of their youth, provide a frank, all-sided and penetrating insight not only into the decay of a physical body, but of the German body-politic as a whole, viewed from the standpoint of two outstanding members of the German intelligentsia. Thomas Mann’s preoccupation with the fate of the German nation is directly dealt with in his late work, the masterly *Dr. Faustus*.

The Faustian bargain of Adrian Leverkühn, who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the revitalisation of his artistic creativity, is intended by Mann at the same time to be a parable for the fate of that section of the German nation which sold its metaphorical soul to the devil of fascism.

In *Dr. Faustus* Zeitbloom reflects: “[L]iars and lickspittles mixed us a poison draught and took away our senses. We drank—for we Germans perennially yearn for intoxication—and under its spell, through years of deluded high living, we committed a superfluity of shameful deeds, which now must be paid for...”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact