

63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 7

“The Weimar Touch”: An interview with Rainer Rother, director of the 2013 Berlin film festival’s retrospective

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This is the seventh in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013. Part 1 was posted on February 21, part 2 on February 27, part 3 on March 1, part 4 on March 4, part 5 on March 6 and part 6 on March 10.

This year’s retrospective section of the Berlinale entitled “The Weimar Touch” was dedicated to the international influence of the cinema of the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933 (named after the German city where the post-World War I constitutional assembly took place). The Weimar era was a period of great social and political upheaval, which opened in the wake of the victorious Russian Revolution of October 1917 and closed with the taking of power by Hitler’s fascists in Germany in January 1933.

Thousands of German film artists were forced into exile during the Weimar period or following the ascent of Hitler. Some emigrated to other European countries, although most ended up in the US. Many, in particular Jewish artists, were later murdered in Nazi concentration camps.

During the Berlin film festival, WSWs reporters Stefan Steinberg and Berndt Reinhardt spoke with Rainer Rother, the head of the Deutsche Kinemathek (German Cinematheque) and the director of this year’s retrospective.

WSWS: What was the main concept behind this year’s retrospective?

Rainer Rother: We wanted to have a retrospective to celebrate our 50th anniversary and also our collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] in New York. The idea was to provide an overview of Weimar cinema concentrating on its international influence.

We quickly agreed that 1933 was a pivotal year—i.e., the year of the Nazis’ coming to power, which marked the beginning of exile for many leading artists who were part of a very rich film culture. International cinema benefited from the forced exile of these artists, and German cinema suffered greatly from their departure.

WSWS: What in your opinion was the contribution made by German exile artists to international film?

RR: This can be pinned down to two genres in particular. First of all, the sphere of sound film operetta, which was very popular internationally in the period of early sound film. This is a very light musical genre that at the same time could serve as a vehicle for dealing with topical social issues.

The German Ufa studio made a number of such films, including *The Three from the Filling Station* [Wilhelm Thiele, 1930], dealing with the economic crisis, and *A Blonde’s Dream* [Paul Martin, 1932], the Depression comedy co-scripted by Billy Wilder, which dealt with tough working conditions.

The other genre is certainly the thriller. If you look at Weimar thrillers such as Fritz Lang’s *M* [1931] or his *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* [1933],

they have quite a dark narrative, the first about a child molester, the other dealing with a large criminal organisation. These types of crime film proved quite popular abroad. The bleakness of the themes found a certain resonance.

Lang went on to make similar films in his early years in America, as did Robert Siodmak in France. One can say that the American *film noir* owes a great deal not only to German, but European influences as a whole. The films reflected a certain ambivalence, a certain darkness that had their roots in European culture and social experiences. They struck a chord with American audiences in a period when scepticism about the future was widespread.

WSWS: Klaus and Erika Mann write about Lang that he really became interested in human and social problems following his flight from Nazi Germany to the US. If you look at his Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s, there is a very strong emphasis on issues such as social justice, the fate of ordinary working people combined with a naturalistic form of representation.

RR: Yes, I follow that argument completely. Although I would say that you can already see the beginning of this turn with *M*, the first film where Lang really takes an interest in the ambivalence of his characters. For me, *M* is a movie that I would place in close proximity to *Fury* [1936, with Spencer Tracy and Sylvia Sydney, about a near-lynching].

WSWS: Many of the émigrés were of a leftist orientation or at least had a critical attitude to the existing social order. How was this reflected in the influence they exerted on international film?

RR: Over 2,000 film artists were forced into exile toward the end of the Weimar Republic. Most of those who lost their jobs were Jews. They did not have a choice. Whoever was a Jew in the German film industry under [Nazi propaganda minister Joseph] Goebbels had no chance of finding a job. They could only work if they were able to find employment in another country.

A number of left-leaning artists also quit Germany for political reasons—for example, Bertolt Brecht and Lang. In our retrospective, we have tried to indicate the diversity of their work and selected a total of 31 films on the basis of broad criteria.

WSWS: The first response of many film-lovers to Weimar film is to stress the role of expressionism. But there were also psychological and social components that played an important role. The German exile arrived in America in the middle of the Great Depression, under Roosevelt’s New Deal. They had already had painful experiences with Nazi Germany. To what extent did these issues take root in America?

RR: The Weimar cinema was a cinema of great diversity. Along with expressionism, there was also the so-called street movie, films with their

roots in psychologically complex and intimate theatrical productions, genre cinema such as the thrillers and science fiction, and also large-scale productions such as [Lang's] *Metropolis* [1927]. In addition, there was a pronounced tendency towards making socially critical films from the mid-1920s onward.

The first stop for many German artists was in other European countries. Often, they encountered problems finding work and moved on, many of them finding their way to America. In Hollywood, they encountered fresh problems. They were working in a foreign language and culture. They did not have an easy time. With regard to socially critical films, there were already native US filmmakers addressing such issues. The exiles were forced to find a niche in which they could carry out their work—even if they had been successful in Germany.

WSWS: The successful German filmmaker F.W. Murnau had problems making the transition, but Lang was able to adapt.

RR: Another example is French filmmaker Jean Renoir, who had great difficulty adapting to the very different type of film industry that existed in America in the 1940s. Lang was able to make US genre films during his exile, even Westerns [*The Return of Frank James*, 1940, *Western Union*, 1941, *Rancho Notorious*, 1952], but he remained European at heart.

This is clear from films such as *The Woman in the Window* [1944] and *Scarlet Street* [1945], which recall [Josef von Sternberg's] *The Blue Angel* [1930, with Marlene Dietrich] in some ways. Lang was born in Vienna and grew up at the Ufa studio.

WSWS: The departure of the émigrés was a great loss for German cinema. What were the consequences for German cinema under fascism and after the war?

RR: The Ufa studio made their own very sober analysis of the state of German filmmaking after 1933. The head of production concluded that after the purging of the studios by Goebbels, there were just 10 directors with any sort of experience left in Germany. That meant that effectively the country could not make more than 10 films per year. The search was made for new faces, but this was especially difficult in the case of directors. The year 1933 was definitely a turning point for German film.

Jews had no place in Germany; there was no room for political and socially critical content in German film. Film projects were strictly controlled by state censors. The Weimar period was denounced in the Nazi propaganda film *Hitler Youth Quex* [1933, shown in the US as *Our Flag Leads Us Forward*], but there was also an attempt to maintain a certain continuity with certain types of Weimar films made in a very superficial manner.

As for after the Second World War, the break in continuity in German film constituted a tremendous loss. The kind of irony and humour characterising popular films dealing with social issues was absent from post-war German cinema. I am thinking of *The Threepenny Opera* [G.W. Pabst, 1931] or *The Three from the Filling Station* .

The Weimar tradition of revue and popular musical theatre is completely absent from German film in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It does appear on the other side of the Atlantic, most notably in *Some Like It Hot* [1959] by Billy Wilder.

WSWS: It is often said Weimar represents the highpoint of German filmmaking. Do you agree?

RR: Weimar is definitely one of the highlights of German film history due to the diversity and experimentation so characteristic of the work of Weimar artists. It was a period when the collaboration of architects, cameramen, and lighting technicians with writers and directors opened up new aesthetic horizons, which went on to enrich the rest of the film world.

Together with Russian revolutionary cinema, Weimar filmmaking, with its sophisticated integration of psychological and social themes, was a model for international cinema. In this sense, it was more innovative than any other period in the history of German cinema. The “New German cinema” of the 1960s and 1970s was part of a European development that

also found expression in the French New Wave and innovative Polish film. The interaction between these various trends was much more pronounced.

At the same time, the revival of classic Weimar film was an important element in the revival of German film in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a slogan “Grand-dad’s cinema is dead,” referring to the bland commercial cinema of the 1950s.

In order to find a new film language, new young directors turned to Weimar, although famously Volker Schlöndorff had to go to Paris and work with Louis Malle to discover the Weimar greats. Others like Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder found their way via American films made by European exiles. Fassbinder’s early television series *Eight Hours Are Not a Day* [1972] owes a great deal to the socially critical film of the Weimar Republic. There was this conscious understanding: something was missing, and much of what filmmakers detected as missing they found in Weimar cinema.

WSWS: What lay behind this variety, this heady mix of different talents and artists, this fertility? In our opinion, it has a great deal to do with the economic and political instability of capitalism during this period, under conditions where the Russian revolution opened the prospects for a new and better form of society.

RR: Perhaps one could put it this way: there was a degree of social demoralisation after the collapse of the German Reich following the First World War. The foundations of the former society had imploded—the result was a moral and economic collapse. This gave rise to a culture that raised all sorts of questions about the future. This was reflected in the cinema of the Weimar Republic in its probing and questioning attitude towards issues affecting millions of lives.

Murnau’s German films are a wonderful example in this respect, but Lang’s *Metropolis* also poses all sorts of questions and undermines accepted certainties about the future. It was a culture that continually asked: are we on the right path? A trend that was reinforced by the economic crises. In this sense, German society and culture were less stable than France’s and Britain’s, and more similar to the Soviet situation in the sense of seeking something new in order to find a new basis for development.

For the present generation Weimar is very remote, 80 years in the past, but I wish there were more attention paid to Weimar cinema, and I hope our retrospective will help raise awareness.



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