

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 7

A fresh look at German cinema in the Weimar Republic era (1919-1933)

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This is the seventh in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14, the second on March 16, the third on March 20, the fourth on March 22, the fifth on March 26 and the sixth on March 29.

Only fragments remain of the rich cinematic heritage of Germany's Weimar Republic era. Approximately 90 percent of the films produced in Germany between 1919 and 1933 are considered lost.

The retrospective at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, "Weimar Cinema Revisited," presented films that have been forgotten for decades, along with their directors. The approximately 30 films on show, divided thematically into "exotic," "quotidian" and "history," have been extensively and lovingly restored in a process involving international cooperation. The films demonstrate the complexity and diversity of cinema during the Weimar Republic—works both modern and full of contradictions, with progress and regression closely bound up with one another.

The artistic director of Berlin's Deutsche Kinemathek, Rainer Rother, has made an intensive study of early German and international filmmaking. His 2012 retrospective, "The Red Dream Factory (1921-1936)," highlighted the socialist influences on Weimar filmmaking and the fruitful collaboration between Soviet and German moviemakers. The revolutionary developments in Germany following 1917-18 also had a profound influence on Weimar cinema.

This year's retrospective included the largely unknown movie *The Queen's Favourite* (*Der Favorit der Königin*, 1922), directed by Franz Seitz, a film in the tradition of the Enlightenment dealing with the suppression of science in the 16th century. Along with its democratic-humanistic influences, it also expresses fears of a revolutionary mass movement. At the end of the film, the moody queen with the airs of a modern, pleasure-seeking woman is forced to sign a death sentence for her lover, a corrupt dignitary. "The people's voice is God's voice," reads the subtitle. Scenes of the assembled, urban angry populace recur in the film.

The contemporary reference is clear. The fragile democratic achievements of the Weimar Republic were concessions aimed at appeasing the masses. The first Weimar government, headed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), came to power after brutally

suppressing the revolutionary movement in Germany inspired by the Russian Revolution, with the help of reactionary *Freikorps* mercenaries. Threatened with a coup by right-wing nationalist elements and the military (the so-called Kapp Putsch), the aroused masses intervened to rescue the government in March 1920.

The German ruling class remained terrified by the prospect of social revolution, especially as social polarisation grew under the SPD. Millions were driven into wretchedness by hyperinflation. The failure of the Communist Party (KPD) to lead the working class to power under revolutionary conditions in October 1923 sharply increased the political frustration of the working population and strengthened right-wing forces. One consequence was the election in 1925 of the former World War I general, Paul von Hindenburg, to the presidency.

After 1920 a number of films looked back with nostalgia to the period of Frederick the Great (1740-86) and the "good old days" of the Prussian monarchy. After Hindenburg's election, the Weimar retrospective's catalogue notes, there was a clear shift in cinematic motifs. The popular theme of the French Revolution with the broad masses at the fore tended to be replaced by "Prussian films" in which the population, with their heads sunk low, marched in orderly ranks under the supervision of patriotic officers.

Films set in the period of Germany's wars of liberation against Napoleon (c. 1807-15) were clearly aimed at directing indignation over the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the occupation of the Rhineland in 1923 by French troops into support for aggressive nationalism. At the same time, the films sought to portray a state ruled by the military as some sort of "people's state" (*Volksstaat*).

The issue of patriotism plays a major role in the film *Regina, or the Sins of the Father* [*Betrayal* in the US] (*Der Katzensteg*, 1927), directed by Gerhard Lamprecht, based on the novel by Hermann Sudermann (1857-1928). It is set in the period shortly before the outbreak of struggles against the Napoleonic occupation of Germany. The main character is a young East Prussian country nobleman. He embodies the figure of the "genuine" patriot, quite conscious of the existence of the lower classes.

This stance is sharply contrasted with a type of patriotism that feeds on supposedly self-serving motives and creates discord. Mass scenes, clearly inspired by Russian revolutionary film, show villagers as a dangerously unpredictable mob. At the end of

Regina, or the Sins of the Father, the young country nobleman leads enlightened peasants in a voluntary army against Napoleon.

One of the more positive qualities of this generally unsympathetic and dour film is the touching and psychologically truthful depiction of the relationship between the young nobleman and his servant girl, Regina. The rigid social relations of the period mean they initially seek to repress their feelings for each other. As in his other films dealing with the miserable social conditions prevailing during the Weimar Republic, Lamprecht renounced the use of exaggerated facial expressions and gestures in favour of more up-to-date naturalness. Human emotions nearly triumph over patriotic sentiments in *Regina*, but the melancholic conclusion of the film indicates that the officer, for whom Regina sacrifices her life, prefers to seek death in the struggle for national freedom.

Homecoming (*Heimkehr*, 1928) by Joe May is an exploration of the psychological consequences of the First World War. The return of a man believed to be dead after a long period of imprisonment during which his wife has remarried is a tragic situation for all those involved. The film is based on the novella by the expressionist writer Leonhard Frank, *Carl and Anna* (1926). How should one behave in this situation? *Homecoming* intimately conveys the need for humanity in times of misfortune, but fails to reflect any of the social tensions of the period. Instead the characters merely continue their daily routine that the war rudely interrupted. (Frank's story, loosely speaking, is also the basis for the 1947 Hollywood film, *Desire Me*, with Greer Garson and Robert Mitchum.)

Under the pressure of growing social and political conflict, the grand coalition under Hermann Müller (SPD) collapsed in 1930. The new minority government ruled on the basis of emergency decrees of the Reich president, Hindenburg. The rise to prominence of the Nazis took place alongside the formation of the Harzburg Front in 1931, an association of right-wing parties. Militarism was increasingly and publicly promoted. In a number of the "Prussian films," partly inspired by American Westerns, daring *Freikorps* soldiers go about their deadly business. The Lützower or black Hussars with skulls on their helmets (the emblem adopted by the Nazi SS) ride confidently to victory against Napoleon in their campaign for national liberation. Other films dealing with World War I took a similar militaristic stance.

Broad layers of the population recognised the approaching threat of war. Expressions of opposition to war can be found in films such as *Westfront 1918* (1930), directed by G.W. Pabst (*Pandora's Box*), and *Hell on Earth* (or *No Man's Land*, *Niemandland*, 1931), by Victor Trivas, which appeal to the international solidarity of ordinary people.

Is Heinz Paul's *The Other Side* (*Die andere Seite*, 1931) truly an anti-war movie, as the media has argued? The film, with Conrad Veidt in a leading role, is based on the popular British World War I drama *Journey's End* (1928) by R.C. Sheriff and keeps the British setting.

There are no shining heroes on display. Instead, after three years of war, we see psychologically deformed people. All war euphoria has disappeared among the group of British officers. Immediately before the expected Germans spring offensive in 1918, they retreat to their quarters in a demoralised state. Only the captain holds

firm, but like all the others, solely with the help of alcohol.

There are moments that indicate the possibility of the opposing armies fraternising with one another. A small dog runs back and forth between the enemy lines located only a hundred yards apart, with a cardboard sign around its neck bearing greetings from the German side. A longing for peace is central to the sympathetic character of Raleigh, a volunteer who appears completely unfit for war and seems to come from another planet.

The characterisation of *The Other Side* as an anti-war film is contradicted above all by the central figure of the captain. He is not prepared to tolerate any insubordination in the ranks and shoots deserters without hesitation. He is a "genuine" patriot, as opposed to those who display mere superficial patriotism. Although heavily marked by the war, he remains dedicated to the fatherland, the soldiers who have fallen and his role as an officer. When the offensive begins, he storms out of the trench with grim determination etched on his face. His expression reflects his hopeless situation—but he does his duty, nevertheless.

Future Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels praised the film in 1931. When the Nazis eventually banned it in 1933 (for its alleged "subversive influence on the people's willingness to defend themselves"), the censors noted positively that the captain was portrayed as a "dutiful man, one could almost say a heroic figure." Heinz Paul went on to make several Nazi war films.

A closer look at the diverse range of films on show in the Berlinale retrospective reveals a propensity among filmmakers to seriously address social issues. Their interest in real life reflects a type of thoughtfulness during the Weimar period which contrasts sharply with the stereotype of a "dance on the volcano" mood, in which fascism is the inevitable outcome.

Nevertheless, figures such as the captain in *The Other Side* or the young, enlightened Prussian noble in *Regina* reveal some of the political problems of that time, including illusions in Weimar democracy, which was established above all to prevent a socialist revolution. There is no equivalent in Weimar film to an anti-war work such as Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918), which ridicules the German military caste and its leadership. The nearest parallel perhaps is Ernst Lubitsch's silent grotesque *The Wild Cat* (*Die Bergkatze*, 1921).

To be continued



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