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Norbert Grob: Vom Gesicht der Welt: Essays zur Filmgeschichte

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Norbert Grob: Vom Gesicht der Welt: Essays zur Filmgeschichte

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To film aficionados and scholars fluent in German, Norbert Grob's name should be familiar. For twenty five years, Grob wrote film criticism for German newspapers and as for, periodicals and spoke about cinema on German radio and television programs. After entering academia as director of media dramaturgy at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität a little more than a decade ago, his studies on film and its history only intensified. He has written or edited dozens of books, chapters, and essays on subjects as diverse as William Wilder, Otto Preminger, Alfred Hitchcock, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Westerns, Weimar cinema, Hollywood cinema, Nouvelle Vague, and Film noir. *Vom Gesicht der Welt* brings together twenty-five essays from the author's extensive bibliography, all loosely connected „zum Klassischen, Modernen, Solitären, oder zum Neuen Deutschen Film“ (S.10). The earliest of the pieces dates from 1992, the latest from 2012.

In an introductory essay, Grob sidesteps the usual academic and proletarian concerns about directors and stars to analyze what the camera itself contributes to film. „Im Film ist es die Kamera“, he posits, „die den *point of view* artikuliert, der wiederum dem Erzählten seine Ordnung unterlegt, indem er den Bildern die räumlichen Tiefe und die Dauer, die Distanz und die Bewegung, den Standpunkt und den Blickwinkel gibt“ (S.15). He goes on to

silently invoke the film theory concept of *suture* in arguing that „[d]ie Kamera zwingt ihn [den Zuschauer] geradezu zur Identifikation, sie suggeriert, dass er an den gezeigten Ereignissen unmittelbar beteiligt ist“ (S.21). Grob's observation tantalizes, but one wishes he had carried the argument further, had penetrated deeper into this psychosomatic phenomenon of identification, comparing and contrasting the camera's effect on the spectator from that of a reader's imagination. Novels and newspapers evoke visceral and physical reactions in their consumers as well. They also change perspective as suddenly as – and sometimes more subtly than – any of Eisenstein's montage sequences.

The author then turns from the apparatus to the director. His survey of various Hollywood and European masters as they attempt to define their profession is a marvel of narrative *enchainement*, encompassing quotes from King Vidor, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, Howard Hawks, Frank Lloyd, Fritz Lang, Jean Renoir, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, Alfred Hitchcock, and Michelangelo Antonioni, among many others. Grob observes that since the end of the 1950s, directors have had gradually to cede artistic control to producers, who now often play a role in screenplay development and casting, in addition to their traditional function of project financing. He concludes that „Gott spielen und die Welt neu erschaf-

fen darf er [der Regisseur] nicht mehr“ (S.45). James Cameron (*Avatar*, 2009) and Peter Jackson (*The Lord of the Rings*, 2001, 2002, and 2003), masters of creating virtual worlds through computer-generated imagery, may wish to dissent. On the other hand, they also produced their respective films.

The remaining chapters provide eclectic coverage, primarily of directors (Yasujiro Ozu, Luchino Visconti, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Peter Handke, Wim Wenders inter alia), but include excursions on the history of Warner Brothers Studios, cinematic gangster lovers, and the National Socialist films of Veit Harlan. Grob's treatments of subjects display an amusing idiosyncrasy, as when he devotes the longest essay to themes and visions of Curt Siodmak, screenwriter of (or, as Siodmak called himself, „idea man“ behind) *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (Roy William Neill, 1943), *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943), *The Beast with Five Fingers* (Robert Florey, 1946), *Creature with the Atom Brain* (Edward L. Cahn, 1955), and *Curucu, Beast of the Amazon* (Curt Siodmak, 1956). Meanwhile, Werner Herzog, arguably one of the most important directors of the twentieth century (at least, Truffaut thought so), receives a mere eight pages. Still, Grob spares no analytic expense in probing Siodmak's Œuvre, conjuring no less than Roland Barthes, Sigmund Freud, Claude Levi-Strauss, Susan Sontag, Goethe, Herder, and Aristotle – all with a light touch – to explain the significance of the various monsters populating the screenwriter's B-movie filmography. His conclusions

– for example, „Monster-Thriller lassen [...] die inneren Ängste äußerlich werden“ (S.241); „Die Metamorphosen bei Siodmak, mal bloß körperlich, mal nachdrücklich, berühren allerdings immer die Ebene einer existentiellen Herausforderung“ (S.247) – add an intellectual dimension to films that might not otherwise be experienced as anything more than creature feature guilty pleasures.

Despite the score of years separating their publication, the essays all express the author's tireless enthusiasm for cinema and share his crisp, impressionistic prose. Directors usually receive one or two pages of biographical background; scene descriptions, often just deft phrases, verbs optional. Thus the opening of Grob's analysis of *Die Freudlose Gasse* (G.W. Pabst, 1925): „Starre Blicke in eine schummrige Gegend: wenig Licht, zerlaufende Schatten. ‚Melchior Gasse‘“ (S.74). Perhaps because of the author's varied career and audiences over the years, the pieces hover stylistically between strict scholarship and popular explication. Thus, the film scholar may find Grob's insights, delivered with passionate intensity, somewhat unsurprising: „Es reicht, zu benennen“, for example, „was Raoul Coutard getan hat, das ist Würdigung genug“ (S.188); „New Hollywood im Sinne Robert Altmans“ the 1970s director, „das verhiess die Befreiung von den Ketten der festen Regeln wie den Zwängen der Konventionen“ (S.199); Jacques Rivette, magic realist director, „ist ein Visionär des Konkreten, das immer neue Gefühle, immer andere Gedanken evoziert“ (S.264);

„Ein evidentestes Kennzeichen des Neuen Deutschen Films ist die Vorliebe für Außenseiter und Sonderlinge“ (S.345). Still, while not necessarily suitable for academic interventions, Grob’s wide-ranging musings and expositions will

deepen any spectator’s appreciation of the many films, directors, and genres the author examines.

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