

Richard John Ascárate

Sven-Ole Andersen: Goethes Faust in Hollywood. Motive der Tragödie und des Themas in ausgewählten Filmen

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Sven-Ole Andersen: Goethes *Faust* in Hollywood. Motive der Tragödie und des Themas in ausgewählten Filmen

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Sven-Ole Andersen admits in the introduction to this new volume that with respect to the *Faust* theme, particularly Goethe's version, there „ist bereits eine fast unübersehbare Anzahl von Schriften, Essays, Büchern und anderen Texten erschienen" (S.9). So vast has the secondary literature concerning Goethe's drama grown that it fills not only bookshelves but entire libraries, encompasses not merely dissertations but entire academic careers. Scholars young and old may rightly wonder what there is left to say about

Faust. What new observation, what new perspective, remains to be discovered? The prospective author, in taking up the classic yet again, may experience some trepidation in recalling the question put forth by the Director (Part 1; *Der Tragödie erster Teil*): „Wie machen wir's, daß alles frisch und neu / Und mit Bedeutung auch gefällig sei?"

Nevertheless, Andersen does seem to have found a new angle. Observing that nearly all *Faust* studies reside within the field of literary criticism, he turns to Hollywood portrayals of char-

acters and themes from Goethe's play to provide fresh insights into the early nineteenth century classic, its less-read sequel, and their twentieth century cinematic descendants. Andersen covers an assortment of films, including *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincente Minelli, 1943), *Damn Yankees!* (George Abbott, 1958), *I was a Teenage Faust* (Thom Eberhardt, 2002), *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnston, 2007), *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *Indecent Proposal* (Adrian Lyne, 1993), *The Devil's Advocate* (Taylor Hackford, 1997), and *Boiler Room* (Ben Yonger, 2000). The chronological range and plot diversity of this list suggest the elasticity of the Faust theme: a man, dissatisfied with life and finding no relief from contemporary religion, science, and philosophy, enters into a pact with the Devil. As Andersen argues, Goethe and the directors of these films engage with a shared collection of perennial concerns, such as human interaction and coexistence, culture, and the quest for individuality and self-creation (auto-poiesis). He demonstrates how these find expression in Hollywood cinema, as well as how the exigencies of American history, society, and culture have transformed characters and situations from those found in the original German version.

In *Cabin in the Sky*, for example, the protagonist, Little Joe (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson), on the brink of death after having been shot for gambling debts, is given six months to redeem himself or he will be consigned to the eternal flames of Hell. During this time, both God and Lucifer attempt

to persuade him indirectly through the women – good and bad – in his life. Petunia (Ethel Waters), Little Joe's long-suffering but pious wife, serves as counterpart to Gretchen in *Faust*. *Cabin in the Sky* also adds a racial dimension not present in Goethe's original but of utmost concern to a United States embarked upon the Second World War. The film features an exclusively African American cast, unusual for its time (and not particularly common even today). Andersen argues thereby that „[v]or allem das Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit zu Amerika sollte die farbige Bevölkerung aufgeschlossener gegenüber der Kriegsmobilisierung machen" (S.99-100).

Though in Goethe's drama Mephistopheles has more (or, at least, more memorable) lines than Faust himself, the Prince of Darkness sometimes doesn't even appear in filmic adaptations of the story. Thus, in *Wall Street*, the devil is not some dark wit with two ravens and a *Pferdefuß* but the powerful if less-than-supernatural corporate raider Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). The film depicts the story of Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), an impatient junior stockbroker in a small firm, who attracts Gekko's attention through a bit of insider information. Gekko takes Fox under his wing, with the understanding that the fledgling will employ any means necessary – ethical, legal, or otherwise – to make profitable trades. As Andersen cleverly contends, „[d]ie bedingungslose Einwilligung des Protagonisten zu einer Zusammenarbeit mit Gekko markiert den symbolischen Verkauf der Seele des Individuums an die absolute Macht des Bösen, denn damit willigt er ein, auf

eigene Beurteilungen der Aufträge zu verzichten, die ihm aufgegeben werden” (S.114).

In *The Devil's Advocate*, John Milton (Al Pacino), head of a phenomenally successful New York law firm, summons young, ambitious, small town Florida defense attorney Kevin Lomax (Keanu Reeves) to assist in jury selection for a case. After a favorable outcome, Milton offers Lomax a position in the firm, along with a fabulous salary and New York apartment. Success amasses for Lomax, as does tragedy for him and his wife (Charlize Theron), as both slowly realize that Milton is Satan himself. They commit suicide, but come to life again through the director's use of a framing device. In essence, Lomax imagined the story depicted onscreen, which Andersen sees as a missed opportunity to critique the American judicial system: „Die wirklich gravierende Aussage des Films, dass nämlich das amerikanische Rechtssystem durch überambitionierte Rechtsanwälte, die ihren Erfolg über den Dienst an Recht und Gesetz stellen, zutiefst korrumpiert ist, wird zurückgenommen und relativiert, indem die Geschichte der Korruption und der Teufelsverfallenheit nur als die Fantasie eines jungen Rechtsanwalts dargestellt wird” (S.122).

Goethes Faust in Hollywood is Andersen's reworking of his dissertation. Alas, the volume yet retains the shortcomings of such an academic exercise. The author devotes almost the entire first half of his slender volume to a literary-historical review of Heinrich Faust's genealogy. The material displays an admirable

breadth of background reading – *sine qua non* for a thesis defense – but offers little new to the Goethe scholar, who presumably knows most of what Andersen lays out, nor to the film scholar, who likely will not be interested in the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (1587) or Martin Luther's *Tischreden* (1566). (Indeed, given Luther's opinion of Rome, one can only imagine what he would have said about Hollywood.) Further, Andersen's prose exhibits the harried graduate student's tendency to repetition when describing plots and presenting findings. Despite this, the author has extended the field of Goethe studies ever so much and, as the aforementioned Director claims, “Wer vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen.” The author has indeed given film scholars and *Germanisten* alike new material with which to continue erecting the edifice of Goethe studies.

Richard John Ascárate
(Washington DC)