

Steve Choe

Wolfgang Kabatek: Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino

2004

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2004.2.1835>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Choe, Steve: Wolfgang Kabatek: Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 21 (2004), Nr. 2, S. 228–230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2004.2.1835>.

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Wolfgang Kabatek: *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino*

Bielefeld: transcript 2003, 223 S., ISBN 3-89942-116-7, € 25,80

Until recently one could not discuss the history of Weimar cinema without implicitly or explicitly acknowledging the discursive models that are already established in the field. The main tendencies can be identified by two seminal books. The first, Lotte H. Eisner's *L'écran démoniaque: les influences de Max Reinhardt et de l'expressionnisme* (1952), connected the visual style and narrative elements of the so-called 'German Expressionist Cinema' with traits reaching back to the Romantic tradition and the gothic novel. Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) showed how Weimar films reflected the deep psychology of the Germans, such that the 'vulnerability' of their mentality to mass deception could be read in the mirror of cinema. Both arguments would look forward to account for the rise of National Socialism and the events of 1933-1945. And both positions, explicated after the war and in exile, have mediated and framed many of our understandings of what Weimar cinema means today.

Wolfgang Kabatek's *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino* addresses an area that falls outside the scope of such aesthetic and psychological critical models. The 'imagerie' of the other deals explicitly with lands, people, and cultures that fall outside the borders of the German nation, foreign and exotic to the cultivated European. Kabatek's main thesis, therefore, revolves around this opposition between the native and the foreign, German and not-German – constituting identity by what it is not: "Dass die kinematographischen Bilder des Anderen dabei in einem komplexen Geflecht verschiedener Diskurse produziert, authentisiert, moduliert, kodiert, rezipiert und gedeutet werden und bei der Entwicklung einer nationalen Identität gewissermaßen *ex negativo* an eigenen Selbstverständigungsprozessen teilhaben, hat diese Arbeit zu zeigen versucht." (p.187) Kabatek's project, to foreground the complex of discourses that have mediated a definition of German national identity *ex negativo*, gains importance in a field that has previously been dominated by few historiographical options. However *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino* does not simply stand in opposition to previous ways of writing the history of Weimar cinema. Kabatek also breaks open those often ossified models, revealing the multiplicity of meaning that has remained dormant in the historical material itself and the body of critique that surrounds it (cf. p.74).

The book is divided into five main chapters. "Das Kino als Agent des Eskapismus?" illustrates an often overlooked, but familiar reason why Weimar audiences would have gone to the cinema. However the escapism that is normally associated with the practice of filmgoing is historicized within the context of the interwar period, indicative of trends in the contemporary film industry. "Verlusterfahrten oder Suchbilder der Ordnung" follows up on the previous chapter in the search for national identity in response to rapid globalization and the crisis of modernity. The realm of the imaginary and the cinema are the arenas in which these questions around identity get played out. "Abenteuerliche Topographien und fantastische Wirklichkeiten" discusses the differentiation of mass entertainment versus art cinema, and the historical conditions which placed this binary at the center of the 'Kino-Debatte'. "Aufmarschplatz der Abenteurer" discusses Fritz Lang's *Das indische Grabmal* (1919) in detail as an example of how Weimar cinema represents the tropes of otherness. The occult, the 'Asian mask', and the feminization of foreign masculinity are highlighted in Kabatek's analysis. Finally, "'Moderne' physiognomische Lesbarkeitskonzepte und visuelle Anthropologie" connects physiognomy and the body to ethnicity and nationality. To this end he draws principally from Béla Balázs' book, *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924), to illustrate how in the silent cinema the body and face must speak the language the spectator cannot hear. It is this cinema which was available to Weimar up to 1929/30 that constitutes an "internationale Sprache" (p.168). And for Kabatek it is these images of other gestures and physiognomies that become readily available for archival and anthropological purposes. Each chapter flows neatly into the next, culminating in Kabatek's highly original insights in the last. The final 32 pages of *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino* are devoted to his vast filmography and bibliography, both impressive and extensive in their own right. In the latter one finds all the key texts in both English and German-language scholarship.

Part and parcel of Kabatek's project is to include previously overlooked films and reappraise those that have already achieved 'classic' status. Fritz Lang's often ignored film from 1919, *Die Spinnen*, is considered alongside contemporary exhibitions of the other in early Weimar, such as Carl Hagenbeck's *Völkerschauen* and Heinrich Umlauff's vast collection of exotica, the largest in Europe. The latter institution, the *Völkerkundliches Museum J.F.G. Umlauff* in Hamburg, provided the artifacts for the Chinese and Peruvian episodes in Lang's film, effectively stamping it with a seal of ethnographic authenticity. Cinema becomes a means to showcase the otherness of the other and celebrate the cosmopolitanism of the 'modernized' self. But alongside Lang's film Robert Wiene's celebrated classic, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, released in the same year, is given a re-examination. Kabatek juxtaposes its stage settings and mise-en-scène to the exhibition spaces of the market and the circus, where order co-mingles with chaos. Again, the exhibition potential of the cinema – the technology of modernity that gathers together all these spaces – is foregrounded. If particular attention is paid to the

way exhibition itself is exhibited, which Kabatek does through his analyses of exotic spectacle and film images of the other. Insights still lurking in the shadows of such 'masterpieces of expressionist film' can be revealed. He shows us how this shift emerges by remaining open to the possibility of new readings and 'other' modes of spectatorship.

Finally some thoughts toward the experience of reading *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino* itself should be articulated. While Kabatek's ideas and arguments move organically from one to the next, and transitions flow seamlessly, there are moments where the prose reads like a dissertation. The idea that national identity is constituted through mutual exclusivity is one that has been widely circulated for the past few decades in postcolonial criticism. Kabatek reveals himself to be an ardent student of this theoretical literature. Familiar arguments from writers such as Jonathan Crary and Homi Bhabha are summarized and in turn utilized to illuminate the text at hand. But at times throughout the text, one is left wanting the reverse – a reading of the films that would modify or even criticize the theory. For example, when Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community is invoked in relation to filmic representations of the nation and of the nation's status as discourse (cf. p.64-5), the challenge here would be to identify the tensions that arise when the imaginary and the image are brought together. The movement between the two actually constitutes one of the most important arguments for Kabatek's book, and there are moments where the latter is in danger of being simply folded into the former. Throughout the text as a whole, several key arguments would be enriched by facilitating such multi-vocal dialogues between theories and texts.

Nevertheless, this is a minor criticism when one considers the importance of Kabatek's contribution to the body of scholarship on Weimar cinema. *Imagerie des Anderen im Weimarer Kino* fills a particular gap in a field dominated by few methodological models. His book is recommended for anyone who is interested in this area, but also for those who are interested in the way scholarship on Weimar film has shifted and will continue to change in the future. Its freshness combined with solid erudition will surely inspire further inquiry and speculation.

Steve Choe (Berkeley)