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## Julia Knight: New German Cinema: Images of a Generation

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### **Julia Knight: New German Cinema: Images of a Generation**

London: Wallflower Press 2004, 124 S., ISBN 1-903364-28-0. € 12.99

In this short, well-written volume, media scholar Julia Knight (University of Luton) traces the birth, life, and seeming demise of New German Cinema, a genre that spanned twenty years from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. Knight argues in the first of three chapters that directors of the genre, though possessed of indubitable talent, did not create in a vacuum, that there existed a "number of historically specific factors that set up some essential pre-conditions for the emergence of the New German Cinema" (p.7). She identifies one such factor as America's handling of the West German film industry after the Second World War. While the Allies attempted to 'denazify' German culture and society, Hollywood, with unlimited access to a new market, flooded Germany with American films. German filmmakers, unable to compete against large Hollywood budgets, turned instead to the interests of homegrown audiences. Thus were born 'Heimatfilme', characterized by low production values and local German themes and flavor. Knight also cites the Germans' need to escape horrible memories of the war, as well as the retention of many Nazi party members in the film industry, as factors in the genesis of the New German Cinema movement. The automobile, too, allowed families to stray farther afield for their entertainment than the local 'Kino' and contributed to the artistic stagnation of post-war German cinema. And television, while initially hurting cinema attendance by exerting the opposite influence of the automobile (i.e., allowing families to stay at home, away from the movie theaters), eventually brought about the creation of more films as television companies commissioned commercial studios and freelance independents to produce works to fill air-time. Knight next traces the rise of the 'Autorenkino' - a cinema of auteurs - from the dynamics generated by a desire to produce a new cinema of high cultural 'quality', by a campaign to promote and export West German cinema as the sole expression (as opposed to products made in the GDR) of national history and identity, and by deliberate and tireless efforts at self-promotion of German directors themselves. Given the limit on loans for first-time projects (DM 300,000) set by the *Kuratorium junger deutscher Film* (Board of Young German Film), directors themselves were compelled to become factotums on their sets, while the smaller budgets dictated shorter shooting schedules and smaller crews. As Knight observes, the "apparently distinctive directorial styles owe as much to the recurring collaborative teamwork that characterize[d] the production conditions of New German Cinema as they do to the promotion of and institutional support for an *Autorenkino*" (p.31).

In the second chapter, Knight asks why films of New German Cinema became popular, why they generated interest both at home and abroad. She argues that the majority of these films "demonstrated a contemporary relevance virtually unprecedented in the history of West German cinema" (p.46) and discusses recur-

ring themes of the exploitation of and prejudice towards the 'Gastarbeiter', the rise of urban terrorism in the 1970s, the Nazi past, the experience of American cultural imperialism and popular culture, and the influence of the women's movement. Knight constructs short and coherent historical contexts into which she embeds discussion of individual films. She gives, for example, background information on the extra-parliamentary opposition movement ('Außerparlamentarische Opposition' - APO), on Chancellor and ex-Nazi Kurt Georg Kiesinger, on Springer press and the Bild tabloid, on the shooting of student protestor Benno Ohnesorg, on the Red Army Faction (RAF), and on the suicides of Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, and Carl Raspe before analyzing characters and individual scenes in *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum / Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (von Trotta, 1975) and *Germany in Autumn / Deutschland im Herbst* (Fassbinder et al., 1978).

In the third chapter, Knight outlines various economic and political elements that caused both professional and public interest in New German Cinema to dwindle. She notes that while state support had at one time raised the 'quality' of German film, such funding "gradually diminished the breadth and diversity of it through political and artistic censorship ... " (p.93). With passing of the 'Radikalenerlass' (1977), or 'Berufsverbot', "film funding agencies became even more conservative" (p.96). Studios and filmmakers in the 1980s reverted to "more commercial and industrial modes of film-making" (p.105), causing German films to lose some of the national specificity that had characterized them only a decade before. Subsequent increases in costs also necessitated that producers search far from their native land for funding and "demonstrate a broader European or international appeal" (p.107), thereby defying generations of film students to later identify the 'German' in a given German work of this period.

The strength of Knight's work lies in her framing of different examples of New German Cinema within social, historical, and political contexts and in making the reader aware of certain aesthetic influences working at the personal, directorial level. Because of this, *New German Cinema: Images of a Generation* would make an excellent introduction not only for film students concentrating upon this particular time and place in cinematic history, but also for students of post-WW II West German history interested in art and culture.

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