

Moitra, Stefan: *'Wo bleibt der Arbeiterfilm?'. Die Auseinandersetzung der IG Bergbau und Energie mit dem Medium Film in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren*. Essen: Klartext Verlag 2004. ISBN: ISSN 1615-4495; 76 S.

Rezensiert von: Florian Schui, Centre for History and Economics, King's College, University of Cambridge
Mail: <fhws2@cam.ac.uk>

What do the B-movie 'Creature from the black lagoon' and the TV-series 'The Brady bunch' have in common with the German trade union movement of the 1950s? The answer to this conundrum of modern historiography can be found in Stefan Moitra's new study 'Wo bleibt der Arbeiterfilm'. The reader discovers that the director Jack Arnold was not only the creator of such B-movie classics as 'Creature from the black lagoon' (1954), and the brain behind a number of episodes of 'The Brady bunch' (1964). In 1950 he made the documentary 'With these hands' for the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Through a mix of fictional and documentary scenes 'With these hands' tells the story of the fight of American textile workers for improvement of their working conditions. The movie had a certain success in America and even won Arnold an Oscar nomination for best documentary (this was as close as Arnold ever got to an Oscar). The success of Arnold's documentary was not limited to the United States. In the post-war period his was one of the movies that the German miner's union included in the schedule of its widely successful movie program.

However, Moitra's analysis of the function of movies, movie screenings, and movie productions for the activities of the German miner's union in the periods before and after World War II offers more than entertaining trivia. After all, his work is published in a small but selective series: besides Moitra's text, the series 'Schriften der Stiftung der Bibliothek des Ruhrgebiets' boasts contributions by the likes of Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Hans Mommsen, and Jürgen Kocka.

The use of documentaries like Arnold's by the German miner's union is at the centre of Moitra's analysis of the union's post-war

movie screening program. The period 1956 and 1967 was the 'golden age' of that program. The screenings in this period included a heterogeneous mix of social documentaries, newsreel type short films about trade union congresses, and American and European feature films. The success with the public was noteworthy. Between October 1951 and December 1952, for example, the audience at the union's movie screenings in various West German locations totalled 146.000 (p. 34). The program was thus not only a defining feature of German post-war movie culture but also a principal means of the union to reach out to its members and the wider public.

Moitra points out that the increasing popularity of the movie program coincided with a tendency of de-politicisation. The films screened became increasingly commercial and in many cases the local branches of the union did not even bother anymore to open the screenings with a political talk. Moitra documents the discussions within the union that accompanied this change of practice. The movie program had been created by the union as a means of political agitation. In fact, feature films had only been accepted gradually, for fear of watering down the political character of the program. However, despite the warning voices within the organisation, the trend towards a de-politicisation of the program continued in the 1950s and 60s. The character of the movie program thus changed from a tool of political activism to a convenient service for members. On one hand, this change accounts for the increasing popularity of the program. But on the other, the transformation also explains the program's end.

In the 1950s and 60s, commercial cinemas and television began to constitute a strong competition for the union's movie program. The author identifies the process of de-politicisation and simultaneously increasing competition as the reason for the end of the union's movie program. However, from a social history perspective, the existence of the movie program in itself is described as an indicator for a continuity of the milieu on which the unions were based, both before and after the war. Moitra argues that the continued importance of movies in the activities of the union demonstrates their unchanged commit-

ment to a traditional working class clientele. In this part of the study, Moitra offers a complex account of the impact of the movie program in the post war period. The function and importance of the program is analysed in the context of the union's political strategy and in the context of German post-war social and cultural history.

However, Moitra does not only discuss the evolution and eventual end of the movie program after the war. In the first part of his study the author considers the early beginnings of the contact between the labour movement and the medium of film. It is significant that trade unions embraced the new medium only with great hesitation in the early 20th century. The same is true of the Social Democratic Party. The attitude of these movements to movies was rather similar to that of the contemporary conservative elite. Movies were seen as vain entertainment, hardly suited to foster 'serious' debate or to create awareness of social and political issues. The miner's union began therefore only slowly to use film and limited its screenings mainly to documentaries on nature and wildlife. Feature films were considered to be not sufficiently educational in character. Consequently the trade unions were also little involved in film productions. The only segment of the political left that actively embraced the new art form of film were the communists. Some of the famous German productions of the pre-war era were produced with co-operation of the communist party. These movies such as the classic 'Kuhle Wampe' (1931) also found their way into the screening programs of the unions. However, it was not until after the war that film was fully accepted as an important medium of communication by the union.

Overall, Moitra's study is of great importance because it considers the use of movies in the framework of the political activities of the labour movement, and in the wider context of social, cultural, and movie history. Inevitably, a short study like Moitra's, with its clear concentration on one particular organisation, does not only give answers but also raises many further questions. In particular, the impact of the Nazi's use of the medium film in the period between 1933 and 1945 on the attitudes and practices of

the union movement deserves further exploration. (The present study does not consider this period at all.) Equally it will be necessary to place the present case in the context of the attitudes to movies of other German, European, and American Unions, and other large political and social organisations. However, while there is certainly room for further research the present study is highly relevant since it makes systematic use of the holdings the movie archives of a German trade union. The study thus draws attention to a previously neglected facet of German cultural history.

HistLit 2004-2-202 / Florian Schui über Moitra, Stefan: 'Wo bleibt der Arbeiterfilm?'. *Die Auseinandersetzung der IG Bergbau und Energie mit dem Medium Film in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren*. Essen 2004, in: H-Soz-Kult 24.06.2004.