

Fay, Jennifer: *Theaters of Occupation. Hollywood and the Reeducation of Postwar Germany*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-8166-4745-3; XXX, 228 S.

**Rezensioniert von:** Johannes von Moltke, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan

On August 16, 1945, the filmmaker Billy Wilder wrote a memorandum to the U.S. Army Information Control Division, advocating a new form of propaganda through entertainment. The exiled Austrian director who had managed to make a name for himself in Hollywood as writer and director, respectively, of films such as *Ninotchka* (1939) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), had returned to Berlin to evaluate the future of German filmmaking in the immediate aftermath of World War II. While Wilder had little hope for the resumption of indigenous production at the time, he saw an opening for a project of his own. Worrying that the Germans would be reluctant to „come week after week and play the guilty pupil“ to the documentaries about German atrocities screened by the Allies, Wilder proposed to make a different kind of film: an entertainment feature, starring Rita Hayworth (or Ingrid Bergman or Gary Cooper), „in Technicolor if you wish“ and with the requisite love story – „only with a very special love story, cleverly devised to help us sell a few ideological items. Such a film would provide us with a very superior piece of propaganda.“<sup>1</sup>

For the reader of Jennifer Fay’s thoroughly engaging exploration of film and reeducation in postwar Germany, Wilder’s memorandum reads both as a symptom of the historical and cultural moment, and as a form of wishful thinking that simplifies the intensely complex relations between Hollywood and German spectators during the American occupation. Not only was the use of entertainment to „sell a few ideological items“ long established both in Germany (where this had been the defining approach of Nazi cinema) and in Holly-

wood; but there was also the perennial question of spectatorship: how would such entertainment actually be received? Would audiences ultimately buy the ideology on offer, as Wilder assumes? And how would occupation as a political, historical, and cultural force impact the ways in which viewers related to the screen?

These are some of the fundamental questions that drive Fay’s compelling investigation of the cultural archive, broadly speaking, of the occupation years from 1945 to 1949. Rightly noting that during these years „culture was highly politicized, gestures instrumentalized, and politics a matter of performance“ (p. xvi), Fay asks us to view the German movie theater not simply as a space of passive or escapist consumption, but as „a site of protest and criticism, a venue for political critique“ (p. xxv) and a place where occupation subjectivity was formed through spectatorship as a „generative (very often oppositional) mode of engagement“ (p. 41). While film historians regularly bemoan the shortage of sources for detailed reception studies of this period in particular, Fay consults military government files, weekly newsreels, trade publications, and press reviews to reconstruct what she calls „horizons of reception“ in which to situate the films of the era. Against these horizons, Fay then develops rich and revealing readings of films ranging from Hollywood classics such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Ninotchka* (1939), and *Gaslight* (1944) to lesser-known German productions such as *Der Apfel ist ab* (1948) and *Hallo Fräulein* (1949). Placing these films in dialog with the archival materials, Fay deftly reconstructs the „call and response of occupation pedagogy“ (p. xxvii).

The two films that help her set the stage for the investigation, however, predate the occupation: *To Be or Not to Be*, Lubitsch’s 1942 anti-Nazi satire, provides a case study for the kinds of performativity and mimesis that will come into play after 1945. As Fay describes it, reeducation generated a „mimetic imperative“ (p. 88) that called on Germans to reenact narratives of assimilation; as we know from Judith Butler, among others, mimicry also introduces the potential for different, divergent performances, or what Fay calls „mimetic slippages.“ Her book consequently attends

<sup>1</sup> „Wilder Memorandum,“ reprinted in Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany 1945-1949*, New York 1989, pp. 40-44. Wilder’s memorandum goes on to outline the project that would later become *A Foreign Affair* (1948). However, Wilder’s film would be rejected for German exhibition, as Fay notes (127).

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as much to the productive misreadings of reeducation as to its ostensible successes. But Fay's story really begins with Leslie Fenton's 1944 film, *Tomorrow – The World*, which she provocatively and rightly describes as an echo of the Nazis' own *Hitlerjunge Quex* (1933). Its propaganda is similarly blatant, its binaries similarly stark, even if some (though by no means all!) of the polarities are reversed in the name of its liberal agenda. Drawing on the dominant psychocultural positions of the day, formulated by anthropologist Margaret Mead and neuropsychiatrist Richard Brickner, Fay shows how the film – much like these theorists themselves – asks Americans to imagine Germany as an ailing patient in need of a cure.<sup>2</sup> Tracing the application of these psychocultural findings to the film medium by authors such as Mead's husband Gregory Bateson or, most famously, by Siegfried Kracauer, Fay sets the stage for an investigation of how film was envisioned as a curative, pedagogical medium – indeed the medium – of reeducation in Germany, and how Germany, the patient of „boy in trouble,“ responded.

Fay's approach to these issues is informed by an array of disciplines, ranging from political theory to film studies, from history to cultural studies, and drawing theoretical inspiration from psychoanalysis and literary criticism. As she works through the implications of different generic frameworks in occupation cinema – ranging from comedy and satire to the musical to the female gothic – this mix proves decidedly productive, but two basic assumptions are particularly important: first, Fay adopts from the psychocultural theorists the argument that German reeducation could be modeled on immigrant assimilation in the United States. One might quibble with this parallel on historical or sociological grounds (the vectors of displacement are reversed; the force of tradition functions differently; etc.); but to do so would be to underestimate the payoff of „reeducation's immigrant trope“ (p. 85) as a heuristic device that allows Fay to construct revealing parallels between, say, the assimilationist stance of *The Jazz Singer* and

the similar displacement of race and guilt in a musical like *Hallo Fräulein*. Second, Fay's interest in the relationship between democracy and liberalism yields a decidedly new reading of the fundamental conundrum of occupation: how to enable democracy by military force and instill liberal values from above. To the degree that this project failed – and for most of the book, Fay implies that it did fail – she places the blame squarely at Hollywood's doorstep, repeatedly pointing out the less than liberal politics underpinning the sprightly narratives Hollywood was exporting to Germany during the occupation.

But if individual Hollywood films regularly fell short of their ideological promises of enlightened liberalism, must we conclude – as Fay does – that America's cinematic culture “[failed] to produce a democratic pedagogy in occupied Germany“ (p. 142)? Depending on one's politics, one might be inclined to object that American occupation paved the way for the foundation of the Federal Republic as a stable democratic state, thus proving its success despite Hollywood's role; or one might agree with Fay's assessment and hold that the fundamental liberalization of postwar Germany did not occur, if it ever did, until after 1968. These broader outlooks are beyond the purview of Fay's study (though her epilog does jump forward, by a somewhat associative logic, to the 50th anniversary of the airlift and the occupation of Iraq to ask what might be learned from the German example about the cultural politics of occupation more generally). In a rather brilliant twist toward the end of her study, Fay does, however, offer a more positive reading of occupation cinema by way of the female gothic. Drawing on feminist work in film studies as well as the political theory of Bonnie Honig, she reads the conflicted subject position of Paula, the heroine of *Gaslight* (released in Germany in 1948 as *Das Haus der Lady Alquist*) as an allegory of what she calls „gothic citizenship“. In this view, spectators in occupied Germany may well have translated the profoundly paranoid disposition of the female protagonists and the suspicions raised on the level of the narratives themselves into a „feminine, rational, even gothic skepticism“ of (male) authority imposed from above – including that of the

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<sup>2</sup> In describing Germany as „a boy in trouble,“ Fay follows Erik H. Erikson; for a broader discussion of the trope of disease in postwar German culture, see Jennifer Kapczynski, *The German Patient. Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture*, Ann Arbor 2008.

military occupation forces (p. 172). The notion of paranoid spectatorship that underpins this reading is extremely intriguing and its introduction at the close of the book challenges the reader, like the spectator of a well-made movie, to reconsider the preceding arguments in light of this denouement.

„Theaters of Occupation“ is a most welcome addition to recent scholarship on cinema in postwar Germany, building on and amplifying the findings by Heide Fehrenbach, Robert Shandley, Jennifer Kapczynski, Jaimey Fischer, Ulrike Weckel, and others. To their studies of the democratizing process, the genre of the „rubble film“, the medicalization of German guilt, the discourse of youth, and the vagaries of Allied film practice and reception, respectively, Fay contributes new perspectives with her careful attention to film form and narration, her nuanced approach to the question of spectatorship, and her critique of the psychocultural and political assumptions driving film policy, if not the politics of Occupation as a whole. The study stands out, moreover, for its understated transnational approach, which allows Fay conceptually to shuttle back and forth across the Atlantic and juxtapose American policy with German reception, German films with American discourse on Germany – or occupation with immigration, for that matter. In this regard, her book might also be read as a contribution to the ongoing redefinition of how we think of national cinemas – a line of inquiry recently taken up, in the German case, by Tim Bergfelder, Lutz Koepnick, and Randall Halle, among others.

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