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Book Review

Anti-Heimat Cinema: The Jewish Invention of the German Landscape

by Ofer Ashkenazi, University of Michigan Press, 2020. 302 pp. \$80.00

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With the publication of his latest book, Ofer Ashkenazi offers an exploration into the influence of Jewish filmmakers on the German notion of Heimat in cinema released between 1918 and 1968. The study includes films by well-known directors such as Ernst Lubitsch, whilst also presenting the reader with the works of relatively unknown filmmakers, for example Helmar Lerski. Ashkenazi's work, therefore, not only generates new conversations about the concept of Heimat cinema and its counter, but also offers an opportunity for German Film Studies to enhance its scope by examining films that are not part of the traditional canon.

The notion of Heimat and its counterculture in German cinematic production does not lack in scholarly engagement. What marks Ashkenazi's contribution as different however is that it highlights the naivety in assuming that Heimat is a notion purely related to the issue of German identity. A core component of Ashkenazi's thesis is that Jewish filmmakers, as 'others' in society, were challenging the definition of Heimat, demonstrating how this concept of Heimat was significant in discourses around Jewish identity in modern Germany. Ashkenazi's Jewish perspective provides a much-needed shift in the field, whereby the voices and experiences of marginalized groups come to the forefront of

academic discourse. This book, therefore, contributes to the ever-growing movement within German Studies to infuse German culture with the perspective of the outsider, which until now had not included the Heimat genre.

The time frame for this study is 1918 and 1968, a period in which the concept of Jewishness in German culture undergoes drastic changes. This is an unusual framework – German Film Studies often analyze early German cinema in the context of National Socialism, tracking continuities and dissimilarities between the films of the Weimar Republic and those produced during the Third Reich. Moreover, studies of the Heimat genre have primarily selected the 1950's as the focus of their enquiries, with a tendency to concentrate on West German cinema. Ashkenazi, however, addresses this research gap in his chapter 'History as Heimat: The Puzzling German Landscapes of Konrad Wolf', which acknowledges the parallel effort in East Germany in using Heimat as a means of searching for identity post-World War Two.

Using the time period between 1918 and 1968 enables the author to acknowledge the foundations in post-World War Two German visual culture in the films produced during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), following the return of Jewish filmmakers who fled Germany when Adolf Hitler came to power. Ashkenazi posits that the anti-Heimat cinema was developed in this 50-year period, counteracting prior scholarship which suggest that the anti-Heimat cinema emerged in the films of the 1960's and 70's as a reaction against the

Heimat films of the 1950's. This does not, however, negate the work that has been done on such films. Ashkenazi's work provides the field with an opportunity to enhance its understanding of Heimat and its role in German cinema and national identity.

Ofer Ashkenazi's latest publication provides new and valuable perspectives on the Heimat genre and its counterculture within German culture from 1918 to 1968. The book analyzes the contributions made by filmmakers, who belonged to a group perceived as being a threat to the national order during the Weimar Republic and beyond and have therefore been excluded from the academic narrative relating to Heimat in German culture. Whilst acknowledging the attempts made by Jewish filmmakers to find a German national identity in which they too can belong, the author does not shy away from problematizing the notion of Heimat as a means of social exclusion carried out by a group who wished to be included in its narrative. There is still much to be done in order to understand the Jewish participation in, and criticism of German identity discourses, however *Anti-Heimat Cinema: The Jewish Invention of the German Landscape* paves the way for a "major arena" (Ashkenazi 9) from which this can be achieved.