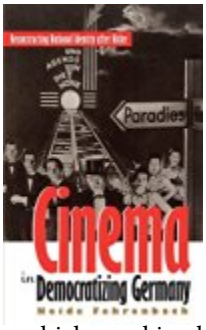
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heide Fehrenbach. *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity After Hitler.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2204-3; $32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4512-7.



Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)
Published on H-Film (July, 1995)

I consider this book–a history of German cinema from its inception to 1962–to be a model of how history and film studies can blend together, each informing the other in unexpected ways. In this impressive work, Fehrenbach shows how German cinema, from its beginnings, has been embedded in the politics of culture and identity. Prior to World War II, the author shows how various social and political groups viewed film from two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand many groups considered cinema a threat that needed to be contained, either because it transgressed class and gender lines and challenged the high culture fashioned by social elites, or because it was a distraction masking the "real" power relations of capitalist society. On the other hand, many groups also considered film as a cultural tool for forming a transclass, transgender national culture. The Frankfurt School's analysis of cinema's role in ideology construction and dissemination can, the author suggests, be seen as part of a broader debate not confined to the intellectual left.

After World War II, cinema's role in constructing a new German identity cleansed of fascist traces took on new importance–not just for filmmakers, but for the clergy, politicians, and military occupiers as well. Rejecting the view that early postwar West German cinema can be understood in terms of a process of "Americanization," Fehrenbach shows that an intense debate took place within West Germany about film's role in resisting American consumer culture and "normalizing" gender and family relations. The most popular early postwar German film genre– the Heimatfilme, which combined elements of the musical revue, the operetta, and comedy–released viewers from a problematic past while helping to perpetuate a distinct sense of German identity and addressing a perceived crisis of masculinity and femininity.

During the 1950s, other groups criticized the Heimatfilme, and sought to use film to stimulate cultural renewal in other ways. The film clubs that began to be founded during the late 1940s, modeled along French lines, sought to promote a civilized cosmopolitan style of filmmaking along the lines of French or Italian art cinema, while eradicating the "volkisch" elements of Nazi culture. By the mid-50s, a group of left-leaning students within the club movement, informed by the writings of Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, demanded a sharper break with the German cultural past. Convinced that ideology and culture were intimately linked, they called for a new explicitly political form of filmmaking. At the same time, many politicians sought subsidies for West German filmmakers as a way to counter the increasing influence of Hollywood films, while cold warriors viewed film as a vehicle for convincing easterners of the superiority of the western way of life.

If you are looking for a scholarly study to read this summer that insightfully shows how culture, politics, and economics are not discrete categories but are inextricably intertwined, I highly recommend this study of the way German film has been self-consciously used to forge a distinct national identity and culture.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-film

Citation: Steven Mintz. Review of Fehrenbach, Heide, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity After Hitler*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. July, 1995.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=117

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.