

# H-Net Reviews

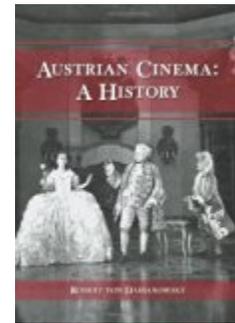
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Robert von Dassanowsky. *Austrian Cinema: A History*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2007. 328 pp. \$75.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-3733-7.

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## A Very Timely Celebration of One Hundred Years of Austrian Cinema

I suppose one must start with an acceptance that Austria's place in public consciousness as a filmmaking nation is not strong, but we now have a book, Robert von Dassanowsky's *Austrian Cinema*, that provides a complete picture of cinema in Austria from 1895 to the early part of the twenty-first century. This reprint in paperback of the original case bound edition (published in 2005) is a valuable and brave venture, revealing that this small state has made many important contributions to the development of film, even if most of them have been abroad, most notably in Berlin and in Hollywood. Within some 285 pages of text, Dassanowsky has covered the widest possible range of topics: films and different film genres, directors, actors, production companies, finance, international connections and cooperation, and last but by no means least much reference to the Austrian political situation at various key periods in the development of its film industry. The author has organized the telling of the story into seven chronologically based chapters, outlining over one hundred years of Austrian cinema, and it will make sense if I briefly summarize their content, the last chapter bringing us into an important and successful phase of Austrian cinema, Austrian cinema in the twenty-first century.

The very early years from 1895 to 1928 cover experiments, hectic growth, and the post-1918 story of Austria's contribution to the silent film. Early film production pre-1914 in Austria was marked by a variety of work, including that of Louise Kolm, one of the first ever female directors. A more important figure was Sascha

Kolowrat (Alexander Josef Graf Kolowrat-Krakowsky, 1886-1927), who spent his inherited fortune on his film company Sascha-Film-AG in 1918 under whose aegis the Hungarian Mihály Kertész, inspired by the work of D. W. Griffith, produced two major blockbusters, *Sodom und Gomorrah* (1922) (now available on DVD) and *Die Sklavenkönigin* (The slave queen) (1923-24).[1] He left for Hollywood in 1926 where he made a successful career as Michael Curtiz. If Austrian film production reached a peak in 1922 with seventy-five films, it fell to a mere five by 1925, and the industry was affected not only by a lack of capital but also by the loss of so much talent to Berlin where many of Babelsberg's greatest directors were in fact Austro-Hungarians: Fritz Lang and Georg Pabst at their head, but Richard Oswald, Karl Grune, Gustav Ucicky, Walter Reisch, Josef von Sternberg, Joe May, Alexander Korda, Paul Czinner, Emeric Pressburger, and many others played a major part in the triumphs of the German cinema between the wars.

The second chapter, "Sound and Diverging Visions: 1929-1938," outlines the introduction of the "talkies," and continues the complicated history of interaction with Germany—particularly so after the National Socialist (NS) takeover in 1933 with all the problems introduced by their race laws. Willi Forst made his debut as director with the Schubert film *Leise flehen meine Lieder* (The unfinished symphony) (1933). Dassanowsky sees him as "one of its greatest filmmakers ... and one more casualty from the negligence that has greeted Austrian cinema since the 1950s" (p. 49). An added complication

was the desire of the clerical fascist Austrian Corporate State to establish itself as an alternative “German” state. Landmark films from the thirties include two starring the popular actress Paula Wessely: Forst’s *Maskerade* (1934) and *Episode* (1935) directed by Reisch. There was also the Austro-Czech production *Ekstase–Symphonie der Liebe* (Ecstasy–symphony of love) in 1933, which made headlines in part because of its nude scene. More typical of the type of film promoted by the Corporate State was the third filming of the “Volksstück” *Der Pfarrer von Kirchfeld* (The priest from Kirchfeld) in 1937, a coproduction by Louise and Jakob Fleck. Yet another Austrian director, Otto Preminger, left for success in Hollywood, having achieved it first in the theater as director of Max Reinhardt’s “Theater in der Josefstadt,” before making his first film, *Die grosse Liebe* (1931), and then quitting Austria forever.

The year 1938 saw the “Anschluss” with NS Germany, and those years, oddly enough, saw a boom in film production—the “Wien-Film: 1938-1945,” when countless films providing light entertainment were produced in Vienna, albeit under the supervision of Berlin. Ucicky, natural son of the painter Gustav Klimt, continued his career in Berlin making the notorious film *Heimkehr* (Homecoming) in 1941 starring Paula Wessely as the victimized German in Poland. However, we are told that of the more than fifty feature films only four were overtly political and cinema audiences were happy to laugh at what the author terms the “dream team” of Hans Moser and Paul Hörbiger.

Under the heading “Postwar and Second Republic Boom: 1946-1959– Reconnections and Re-visions,” chapter 4 covers the immediate postwar years up to 1959 when the Austrian film industry endeavored to forget its immediate past and to reestablish itself. The occupying powers played their parts but there was no financial support from the Austrian government. In addition to the “dream team” and Wessely and her husband, Attila Hörbiger, several new names now established themselves—directors Karl Hartl, Ernst Marischka, and E. W. Emo, and “stars” O. W. Fischer, Oskar Werner, and Romy Schneider. However, Wessely’s casting as a Jewess in Hartl’s film of Ernst Lothar’s novel *Der Engel mit der Posaune* (The angel with the trumpet) in 1948 was much criticized in view of her wartime role (p. 127). This decade and a half is described by the author as a period of “unexpected success,” but the final years showed a serious drop in production that was an omen of things to come (p. 176).

Chapter 5 bears the heading “The Missed Wave: 1960-

1979–Commercial Disintegration; Actionism; Isolated Experimentation.” Under the increasing dominance of television coupled with a continued lack of funding, these years produced in the Austrian film industry a situation where the *International Film Guide* of 1977 could declare that “there is no real film culture in Austria.” Films were made of stage productions of Ferdinand Raimund, for example, and the Burgtheater’s production of Friedrich Schiller’s *Don Carlos* (1961). In 1968, “only seven ‘nominally’ Austrian films made it to the screens” (p. 192). However, newcomer Georg Lhotzky made a film for television of Gerhard Fritsch’s novel *Moos auf den Steinen* (now available on DVD), which the author describes as the “only true Austrian film” (p. 193). Also described are the attempts at the creation of ultraradical “alternative filmmaking,” some of which were described by the *Kronen Zeitung* as “perverse trash” and ultimately “conservative censorship” won the day (pp. 196, 199, 197) The introduction of color TV did nothing to help the cause of Austrian cinema but two films stand out: Maximilian Schell’s screening of Ödön von Horváth’s *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* (Tales from the Vienna woods) in 1979 and Axel Corti’s grim story *Der Fall Jägerstätter* (The case of Jägerstätter) in 1972—a simple man who refuses military service and is executed by Nazi authorities.

In chapter 6, “New Austrian Film: 1980-2000,” we learn of important changes: a certain amount of government support is introduced into federal law and Dassenowsky senses a new interest in film from the public and even some international recognition. However, there was a decline in the number of cinemas in the early eighties from 495 in 1981 to 345 in 1988. Franz Antel produced *Der Bockerer* (Bockerer) in 1981—an important attempt (influenced in part by the Italian cinema) to get to grips with the Nazi past. Another key production was *Der Schüler Gerber* (The student Gerber) in 1980, Wolfgang Glück’s film of Friedrich Torberg’s novel (available on DVD). Altogether these years seem to demonstrate a new spirit in Austrian film, and by the 1990s “the notion of a multicultural Austrian cinema became a much wider concept” and “there were also positive signs by the end of the last decade of the century that Austria had indeed become a nation concerned with its own cinematic legacy” (pp. 230, 234). One new talent was director Stefan Ruzowitzky, whose *Die Siebtelbauern* (The inheritors) in 1998 is analyzed at great length. It continued the long Austrian tradition of the “Heimatfilm,” and is seen in some measure by the author as a corrective to Hollywood’s *The Sound of Music*. Since the book was written, Ruzowitzky has made the prize-winning film *Die Fälscher* (The coun-

terfeiters [2007]) also available on DVD, which includes an interesting interview with the director in which he makes the point that German-speaking critics find it difficult to reconcile films which entertain and yet possess a moral, ethical content.

Finally with “Austrian Film in the Twenty-First Century,” we reach the stage where one or two directors are producing films able to win nominations for “Best Foreign Films” at international festivals. The names of men like Michael Haneke *Die Klavierspielerin* (The piano teacher) in 2001 and now *Das weisse Band* (The white ribbon) and Ruzowitzky are known to more than the dedicated cineaste. They are of course “Euro directors,” since filmmaking has long become a business of international cooperation and, crucially, of funding. There are also talented women at work, like Barbara Albert whose film *Nordrand* (1999) was “the first Austrian film in decades invited to screen in competition at the Venice Film Festival in 1999” (p. 271). This, too, is now available on DVD.

I very much hope there will be a second edition; Dassanowsky has given us a mass of well-researched material covering so many different areas that if the book is to be of use to students and researchers, it is imperative that a second edition provides a subject index. Following the complex web of references to that very Austrian genre “Heimatfilm,” gender issues, problems of funding, the development of various key directors, the impact of politics, Austrian film abroad, and much more would then be made much easier. Another area that could be improved is the references to films. Reading the names of so many films (incidentally there is no index of film titles) one is reminded of Graham Greene’s remarks when reviewing films in the 1930s in which he commented that out of 124 films he had reviewed in the last eleven months only thirteen had conveyed any aesthetic experience while at least 63 of them were trash.[2] Bearing in mind that so many of the films mentioned are from such a wide range of genres—including the filming of stage produc-

tions and television films—a second edition would benefit from giving some indication of their artistic merit. The author does analyze some films at greater length, as for example Lhotzky’s *Moos auf den Steinen*, Ruzowitzky’s *Die Siebtebauer*, and, naturally, Haneke’s *Die Klavierspielerin*. This latter film won awards at the Cannes 2001 Film Festival, which “stunned Austria” and subsequently “swept the European Film Academy Awards,” although the director refused to allow its screening at the Viennale—Vienna’s annual film festival (pp. 256-258).

The author, Dassanowsky, is not only professor of German and film studies at the University of Colorado but also a filmmaker in his own right. He has given us a thorough overview of Austrian cinema and its interaction with and contribution to other centers of film production. It is a fascinating story that will open many eyes. The volume has an extensive bibliography and many apposite illustrations (one must note that the cover is of Robert Wiene’s film of the *Rosenkavalier*, a film made in Austria by a German director). As I have mentioned, I hope there will be a second edition which will benefit tremendously from a subject index. The present volume in the meantime will be an essential reference work for all libraries of film studies and indeed of any library where Austrian studies in general are featured.

#### Notes

[1]. My references to films available on commercial DVD refer to the production of 125 key Austrian films, which range from the 1920s to the present (a three-way cooperative effort between Hoanzl, *Der Standard*, and the Austrian Film Archive). For details see [www.hoanzl.at](http://www.hoanzl.at).

[2]. See Graham Greene, *The Pleasure Dome: Collected Film Criticism, 1935-40*, ed. John Russell Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 79, 80. There are several references to Austrian films, directors, and actors in this volume.

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