

# H-Net Reviews

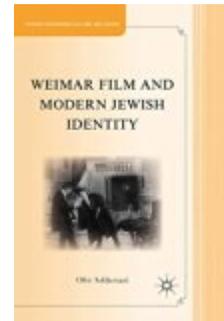
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ofer Ashkenazi. *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 250 S. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-34136-4.

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## Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity

The intricate and important connections between Hollywood and the Jews have long been established and demonstrated, from Neal Gabler's contention that the Jews invented Hollywood (p. 149) to Omer Bartov's celebration of Woody Allen and his Jews' ability to assimilate into a New York society that is at the same time assimilating itself into their world (p. 41). The remarkable Jewish presence in German cinema of the 1920s has been less explored, and when it has, scholars have tended to focus on the anti-Semitic elements of these films. Is it even possible to conceive of the idea of a Weimar Woody Allen? Ofer Ashkenazi thinks so and argues persuasively in his outstanding new study *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity* that Weimar cinema was a crucial space for "the contemplation and exhibition of Jewish experience in Germany during the Weimar years" (pp. 2-3) and that a significant body of films (mostly by Jewish filmmakers) worked "to promote the formation of a liberal, multicultural, transnational bourgeois society, in which 'the Jew' could be different, but equal" (p. 15). In five economically written and smartly argued chapters, Ashkenazi examines both the well-known and little-known films in which Jewish artists of the Weimar Republic examined and negotiated the Jewish experience in modern Germany. Ashkenazi combines a historian's attention to context and archival research with a film studies scholar's attention to cinematic aesthetics to construct a convincing and well-told narrative of the interplay between the Jewish experience on the screens and on the streets of Weimar Germany.

Ashkenazi concentrates on genre films, arguing that they constitute "a major symbolic site at which the intricacies of early twentieth-century German Jewish identity were condensed and exhibited" (p. xv). It is significant that he begins with a genre that is a surprising choice for those familiar with the tradition of scholarship on Weimar cinema: urban comedies. Genre films have long been the subject of analysis of Weimar cinema, but representative genres have tended toward the darker side, viewing Weimar cinema as a "haunted screen" full of monsters and murderers. Ashkenazi does consider melodramas, horror films, and adventure and war films, but he continually returns to comedies. He finds, for example, that the femme fatale in the horror film *Alraune* shares more in common with the playful young protagonist Ossi of Ernst Lubitsch's *I Don't Want to Be a Man* (1918) than with the traditional femme fatale Lulu of G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929) (p. 78). For it is in the comedies that the clever mimicry and reversal of anti-Semitic stereotypes can best be achieved through what Ashkenazi argues is a type of double encoding in which Jewish characters can be read both as a stereotypical image of "the Jew" and, at the same time, as a stereotypical middle-class urbanite (p. 27). Through clever analyses of canonical films, such as those by Lubitsch, and more obscure films, such as Reinhold Schünzel's *Heaven on Earth* (1926-7) and *Hercules Maier* (1927), Ashkenazi demonstrates that these urban comedies envision a space where Jews can assimilate into a liberal and transnational urban bourgeoisie, without eradicating any sense of difference.

Ashkenazi's analysis of domestic melodramas in the following chapter takes its cue from feminist scholarship such as Patrice Petro's groundbreaking *Joyless Streets* (1989) and its emphasis on female perspectives, but turns its attention instead toward a different nonhegemonic perspective: that of bourgeois Jews in the Weimar Republic. He argues that the urban melodrama explored the city as a hybrid space in which "the stranger" becomes a necessary mediating figure in modern society. Weimar Jewish filmmakers thus took a familiar Jewish stereotype (the urban Other) and used it as a means to integrate Jews into modern society. This argument is best made through an alternative reading of Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923) as an allegory of assimilation in which collectivity through "shared *habitus* and morality" (p. 56) replaces collectivity through national identity. The film ends, however, with the failure of this assimilation. The protagonist is unable to acculturate into this space and forced to return to a more restricted participation in middle-class society. This unhappy end in which the assimilation-seeking protagonists are forced to choose between either segregation or conversion is typical of the Jewish Weimar urban melodrama (Grune and Czinner's *Jealousy* [1926] is a notable exception). So, if the comedies provided a light-hearted tale in which the protagonists are able to assimilate into a transnational bourgeois community, the urban melodramas looked at the tragic consequences of the failure of this assimilation. But even in these unhappy ends, Ashkenazi finds a cautious optimism on the part of the Jewish filmmakers, who "urged viewers to embrace the assimilation enterprise by focusing on the catastrophic implications of the failure of this project" (p. 75).

Even cautious optimism, however, became an increasingly difficult position to embrace by the final years of the Weimar Republic, as Ashkenazi demonstrates in his reading of three versions of *Alraune* in the following chapter: Hanns Heinz Ewers's 1911 novel, Henrik Galeen's 1927 film adaptation, and Richard Oswald's 1930 film adaptation (a third adaptation, made in 1918 by Eugen Illés, is sadly lost). Ewers's critique of Wilhelmine conservatism and anti-Semitism and his emphasis on hybrid identities provided Weimar filmmakers with a powerful metaphor through which to examine the problems and possibilities of assimilation of the Other into bourgeois German society. In 1927, Galeen is able to transform Ewers's story into an allegory of assimilation into

middle-class society, as Alraune transforms herself from a victim of scientific overreaching into a skilled negotiator of modern culture. The eternal vampire of Ewers's story finds happiness in bourgeois marriage in Galeen's story. The "monster"—be it a rebellious woman or a Jew—need only be accepted into middle-class society for it to lose its monstrosity. Three years later, even this solution seemed unachievable to Oswald, who sets his story firmly within recent German history and uses it to express his anxieties at the seeming hopelessness of the project of assimilation and the failure of double-encoding. In the political and social climate of 1930, no happy end is possible for Oswald's Alraune the way it was (however improbably) for Galeen's Alraune in 1927.

In his final chapter, Ashkenazi takes up the genres of the adventure and war films, both of which are linked to each other and to the other genres discussed in this book by their emphasis on border crossings and encounters with strangers (p. 111). The two films that he features in this chapter—Joe May's *Mistress of the World* (1919/20) and Richard Oswald's *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel* (1927)—both depict the transformation of outsiders into "celebrated heroes of a transnational community of middle-class urbanites" (p. 112). Given the typical hyper-nationalism of the war film and the anti-Semitic discourse surrounding Jewish participation in World War I, this genre in particular would seem to be an odd one for Jewish filmmakers to embrace. However, Oswald uses the genre to depict "a positive shell shock" (p. 132) in which the outsider is integrated into a transnational bourgeois community that overcomes national divisions.

Alexander Bessel was able to assimilate into a progressive, transnational, bourgeois community characterized by a commitment to individual freedom and social justice. But as we all know (and as Ashkenazi is well aware), such a community did not in fact exist in inter-war Europe (p. xiv). What *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity* shows us, however, is that such a community did exist on the screens of the Weimar Republic. These films by Jewish filmmakers—be they comedies or melodramas, horror films or adventure films—sometimes expressed hope and optimism, sometimes expressed anxiety and despair, but always expressed a desire to show a path toward a society in which the Jewish experience of modern Germany could be successfully negotiated.

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