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A Visual History of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

In recent years, scholars of modern Germany have revealed the long and complex history that representations of German wartime victimization have enjoyed throughout the postwar years.[1] The contributors to *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering*, edited by Paul Cooke and Marc Silberman, fortify this historiographical trend by addressing ways in which German filmmakers have wrestled with their nation's wartime and postwar suffering. By scrutinizing the multiplicity of thematic choices and aesthetic strategies in a variety of films from the 1950s to the present, historians explore the distinct, often shifting, screens on which artists have sought actively to project historical perspectives of German victimization. In so doing, they address how changing depictions of suffering Germans have shaped the manner in which the postwar German states, and the now unified one, have come to terms with the past.

The essays in the volume address the above concerns from four interrelated angles. In part 1, "Hidden Screens," contributors examine implicit ways in which West German filmmakers have grappled with the past. In "Armchair Warriors: Heroic Postures in the West German War Film," Jennifer Kapczynski reveals the military heroes depicted in 1950s war films as psychologically wounded and reluctant soldier figures lacking assertive agency in their own right. Such depictions questioned traditional soldier models emphasizing unambiguous confidence, aggression, competition, and pride. Instead, the male protagonists rejected politics, defied military rules and regulations, and emerged as laudable exemplary models of an anti-ideological stance. Even though this woundedness and lack of ideological fervor served to fortify a postwar discourse of a "clean" *Wehrmacht* as victim rather than perpetrator, the soldiers' vulnerability and humbleness provided a new postwar model of masculinity, one in which wounds and suffering would not go away. With such depictions, these films indicated perhaps to their audiences that the most recent past could not simply be erased as well. In his piece, "German Martyrs: Images of Christianity and Resistance to National Socialism in German Cinema," David Clarke investigates the hidden appeal of passive and active Christian resistors, who had become Nazi victims, throughout much of the history of postwar West German film. Time and again, Christian imagery of martyrdom articulated collective memories of guilt and redemption. Even though throughout the following three decades the theme of Christian resistance was notably absent in West German film, due to increasing public focus on German crimes rather than suffering as well as the rise of an increasingly materialist, consumer-oriented culture, the recent representations of suffering Germans in post-unification productions revive some of the Christian motifs of the 1950s film culture, with a new and more explicit emphasis on the acknowledgement of German collective responsibility for Nazism. In "The Rhetoric of Victim Narratives in West German Films of the 1950s," Manual Koeppen discerns a hidden Holocaust discourse within late 1950s film of the Federal Republic. Contrary to the notion that the persecution of the Jews was repressed, the author argues that allusions to German atrocities played an integral role in the rhetorical strategy of figuring anti-Nazi resistance as a moral act. Jewish victims appear in films, even if only in subplots, as stand-ins for the German as a victim of a collective fate, and ultimately as justification for German suffering. Such attempts to cope with the past continued into the 1960s, even as a shift took place in the way in filmmakers sought to come to terms with the past, with Jewish persecution, rather than German defeat, assuming prominence in public discourse. The recent boom in films depicting German suffering represents, to a large extent, the revival of 1950s film subject matter. Unlike earlier, the films move from a sharp differentiation of the question of guilt within German society to a more universal

sense of wartime suffering and culpability for atrocities that no one, whether German or non-German, can escape.

Part 2, "Projection Screens," expands the films under study to include Austrian and East German features, with contributors scrutinizing cinematic techniques of identification, denial, and nostalgia. In "Sissi the Terrible: Melodrama, Victimhood, and Imperial Nostalgia in the *Sissi* Trilogy," Erica Carter takes an indirect approach to German suffering by scrutinizing the enormously successful *Sissi* trilogy (1955), a historical costume drama focused on the life of the Austrian empress Elisabeth (1837-98), which the author argues evoked imperial nostalgia and expressed melancholy regarding territorial loss of German-speaking lands. Carter reveals how the historical drama's poignant and melodramatic aesthetic resonated with German and Austrian audiences, both of whom were still reeling from a profound postwar shock of loss. Although the trilogy did betray an effort to fix historical time within a conflict-free space of a pictorial landscape, it did not shy away from incorporating traces of modernity. In so doing, the trilogy indeed responded to longings among postwar Germans and Austrians for the security and hope of *Heimat*. In her contribution, "Political Affects: Antifascism and the Second World War in Frank Beyer and Konrad Wolf," Sabine Hake analyzes 1960 films by two of East Germany's most celebrated directors, both of whom aimed to deconstruct the conventional antifascist master narrative of heroic resistance to Nazism. By combining the antifascist with the war narrative in their works, both filmmakers engendered an aura of melancholy and mourning through the crises of their antifascist heroes, all the while seeking to produce and maintain a socialist imaginary. Through modernist techniques evoking affect, Beyer and Wolf opened up ways in which antifascism was not only to be believed, but also to be conveyed aesthetically, as a fantasy and longing. Even though filmic experimentation did not mean political dissent or automatic opposition to the fundamental ideological and institutional structures of the antifascist myth, political affect did indeed introduce narrative perspectives and visual effects undermining official rhetoric as it explored previously suppressed attitudes and sentiments about German wartime suffering, the allegiance with the Soviet Union, and growing concerns about the future survival of socialism itself. In his contribution, "Shadowlands: The Memory of the *Ostgebiete* in Contemporary German Film and Television," Tim Bergfelder discusses recent postwar narratives of traumatic expulsion and loss related to former eastern regions, stories aimed at providing for a smooth construction of a cohesive postwar national community within the new borders of *Heimat*. In the documentary films of Volker Koepp and Kai Wessel, for example, the author argues that both artists contributed quite positively to the recent memory culture of German suffering during the Second World War by rejecting the need, or indeed possibility, of providing a coherent, accurate, and comprehensive representation of history. Instead, the filmmakers sought to produce fictional narratives destabilizing official memories and apparent certainties of war and its aftermath, and in so doing, seemed to express utopian longings to "step out" from the past in order to enable the imaginings of novel cross-border identities beyond those grounded in national terms.

In part 3, "Display Screens," volume contributors focus on particular depictions of wartime suffering in German film. Rachel Palfreyman, in "Links and Chains: Trauma between the Generations in the *Heimat* Mode," explores the representation of generational rupture throughout the very popular 1950s *Heimat* film genre. Challenging the notion that such features simply provided popular escape from the past and repression of guilt, the author indicates how *Heimat* stories often depicted dysfunctional families and victims of domestic abuse as allegories of the traumatic impact of war experiences and the lingering of responsibility for Third Reich crimes across generations. Such tales rarely arrived at definitive and neat resolutions. Palfreyman indicates how recent post-unification films have continued to harness the concept of *Heimat* in order to wrestle with the generational transfer of guilt and suffering, now often encompassing additional postwar traumatic phenomena as well, such as domestic terrorism in the Federal Republic. In her piece "Resistance of the Heart: Female Suffering and Victimhood in DEFA's Antifascist Films," Daniela Berghahn focuses on films of the 1970s and 1980s produced by the *Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft* (DEFA) that emotionalize antifascist resistance by foregrounding female protagonists in what had normally been defined as a male genre, and which relocate the conflict from the realm of collective political pathos to the private passions of romantic couples. Highlighting the personal over the political, these later antifascist narratives depicted scenes of intimate grief and suffering, demonstrating the vital importance of feelings and emotions, and not just ideology, in forging a socialist identity of antifascist resistance. Instead of serving as mere helpmates to their heroic husbands, women emerge in such films as independent agents in their own right. In "Suffering and Sympathy in Volker Schloendorff's *Der neunte Tag* and Dennis Gansel's *NaPolA*," Brad Prager explores

strategies of audience identification in order to elucidate how displays of suffering function in contemporary heritage films dealing with Germans as perpetrators. Acknowledging the exhaustion of paradigms from the 1990s revealing affects of generosity, romantic attraction, or pity toward Jewish victims of Nazi crimes, filmmakers are turning to non-Jewish suffering protagonists. Rather than criticize such films for effacing Jewish victims, the author lauds attempts at exploring novel ways of challenging viewers. Although conceding that such techniques evade the question of how one identifies with the suffering of people unlike oneself, Prager concludes by placing into question the extent to which today's Germans, who were not past perpetrators of crimes against the Jews, could ever gain understanding of the latter.

Part 4, "Split Screens," offers analyses of quite alternative approaches to depictions of German suffering. In his piece, "Eberhard Fechner's History of Suffering: TV Talk, Temporal Distance, Spatial Displacement," John Davison reflects upon how Fechner's television documentaries of the 1970s and 1980s dealing with the Third Reich sought to shift the portrayal of historical victimization away from representations of an internal subjective state to a television-specific temporal and spatial constellation. Fechner sought to optimize the television medium, while undermining the authority that the medium evokes through claims of temporal immediacy, relevant facts, and balance. In so doing, Fechner offered the viewer a uniquely uncertain vantage point preventing the objectification and totalizing of the past. In "The Politics of Feeling; Alexander Kluge on War, Film, and Emotion," Johannes von Moltke reveals how certain film artists in the postwar period, such as Kluge, challenged conventions of melodramatic screen dramatization of the Second World War intending to link explicitly the viewers' identification with clearly innocent victims, often suffering heroines. By creating a sense of emotional and affectively charged disorientation, Kluge reminded his viewers of the need for a far more patient, flexible, and critical perspective of war, which he believed could never be truly represented. Finally, in "Post-unification German-Jewish Relations and the Discourse of Victimhood in Dani Levy's Films," Sean Allan challenges the notion that post-unification comedy in Germany seeks to normalize history. He explores how filmmakers emerging throughout the 1990s, such as Dani Levy, strive to offer an alternative aesthetic to the melodramatic presentation of victimhood and the realist conventions of, and pretensions to, pseudo-historical authenticity. As a Swiss-born self-identified Jew, Levy uses irreverent and often politically incorrect comedy in order to problematize often essentialized and morally infused notions of national identity and victimhood. By presenting identity as performance, Levy reveals the instability and contradictions of conventional social structures. Rather than evaluating such an approach as bolstering moral relativism, Allan argues that one should perhaps consider such efforts as constituting an attempt to redefine traditional paradigms of perpetrator and victim. For the author, filmmakers like Levy reveal identity as an active commitment to a particular set of moral values, rather than a timeless and unchanging marker grounded in national terms.

Through a careful scrutiny of a wide array of filmmakers and their work, *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering* offers a vivid glimpse of the cultural history of German visual media throughout the post-WWII period. Focusing on phases, generations, continuities, and breaks within the construction of memory on film, the volume constitutes a formidable contribution to the growing scholarly literature indicating the multifaceted, shifting, and often nuanced ways in which Germans have sought to actively engage with their most recent past throughout the decades following the end of the Second World War. The book, however, also serves to remind its readers that the more pluralistic and ambiguous attitudes emerging from filmmakers regarding German narratives of perpetration and suffering in post-unification film do not simply reflect a drive to reject the history of the Third Reich and refuse guilt for its crimes. Instead, such efforts perhaps reflect the successful incorporation of Nazi atrocities into the memories of individual Germans and a self-critical, humble, and scrupulous engagement on the part of the latter with a disorienting and uneasy past in order to establish firm foundations for the future.[2]

Notes

[1]. Neil Gregor, *Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Klaus Naumann, ed., *Nachkrieg in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001); Norbert Frei, *1945 und Wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewusstsein der Deutschen* (München: Beck C.H., 2005); Sabine Behrenbeck, "Between Pain and Silence: Remembering the Victims of Violence in Germany after 1949," in *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37-64; Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Mem-*

ory and Historical Responsibility (New York: Routledge, 2007); Mary Nolan, "Germans as Victims During the Second World War; Air Wars, Memory Wars," *Central European History* 38 (2005): 7-40; Constantin Goschler, *Schuld und Schulden: Die Politik der Wiedergutmachung für NS-Verfolgte seit 1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005); Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Wolfgang Kaschuba, "Gedächtnislandschaften und Generationen," in *Der Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel des öffentlichen Gedächtnisses: Formen der Aufarbeitung und des Gedenkens*, ed. Petra Fank and Stefan Hördler (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2005), 120-135; Margit Reiter, D*ie Generation danach: Der Nationalsozialismus im Familiengedächtnis* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag GmBH, 2006); Helmut Schmitz, *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi Publishers, 2007); Bernhard Rieger, "Was Roland a Nazi? Victims, Perpetrators, and Silences during the Restoration of Civic Identity in Postwar Bremen," *History and Memory* 19 (Fall/Winter 2007): 75-111.

[2]. Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims?-Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacies," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 1-35.

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