

# H-Net Reviews

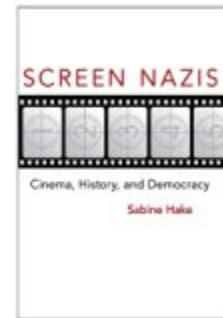
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sabine Hake. *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. xiii + 308 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-28714-6.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Sabine Hake, the Texas Chair of German Literature and Culture at the University of Texas at Austin, notes in *Screen Nazis: Cinema, History, and Democracy* that since World War II there has been a plethora of films produced about Nazis and Nazism. She asserts that Nazism has received more attention in popular culture than any other form of fascism stemming from World War II and poses the question, what causes the almost compulsive preoccupation with “sexy Nazis” and “nasty Nazis”? She sets out to answer this question by identifying and analyzing several important themes in these films, which she classifies as a genre with historically and nationally distinct subgenres, demonstrating that the films serve specific purposes for the nations in which they are produced and engage with important cultural and political issues of the time.

Hake argues that “filmic representations of Nazism/fascism have provided a projection screen for the problems of postwar democracies and the contested status of ideology in the postfascist period.” Through her analysis of selected films, Hake reconstructs the “interrelatedness of fascist past and postfascist present through the historical contexts in which these films were originally made and seen,” focusing on specific historical events between World War II to look at “the fascist imaginary in postfascist cinema” (p. 5). She pays close attention to “the role of affect in film,” which she defines as the ability of feature films to affect someone or something and to produce affects beyond contents and meanings, and specifically political affect. This attention to the role of affect allows for an analysis of “the antagonistic structure that makes the fascist imaginary the absolute other of the democratic imaginary, with both terms to be understood as two competing and evolving sets of feel-

ings, attitudes, and beliefs about government, society, community, nation, and, most importantly, the individual as the founding site of democratic subjectivity” (p. 5). In films produced during World War II, fascism and democracy were placed in direct conflict with each other. After the defeat of Germany and the onset of the Cold War, Hake identifies a shift in films about the Third Reich to films in which fascism stands in for something else in the conflicts portrayed—fascism can be examined as a signifier. The emergence of poststructuralism as a new epistemological and aesthetic paradigm and the decline of communism as a valid alternative to capitalist liberal democracies further alter the way in which fascism can be understood in films about Nazis. Hake identifies three periods in the transformation of post-fascist imaginary: the period from 1945 to 1968, during which Nazism served as a stand-in for communism in the West and capitalism in the East; the period from 1968 to 1989, which, under the influence of poststructuralist critique of the master narratives and Enlightenment rationality, brought a confrontation with fascism’s erotic and aesthetic attractions; and the period from 1989 to the present, which, partly in response to the forces of globalization and the weakening of the nation-state, contributed to the historicization of the Nazi past and its enlistment in new postpolitical configurations, including nostalgia for the politics of clear enmities (pp. 24-25). She states that the historical markers during each period of transformation can be used to identify significant changes in the modes of historical representations: classical realist or social realist styles in the 1950s and early 1960s, modernist and documentary styles in the 1960s and 1970s, postmodern and retro styles since the 1980s, and historicist or heritage styles since the 1990s (p. 25).

In her assessment of films produced in the United States, Germany, and the Western European nations occupied by the Nazis during World War II, Hake claims that “the fascist imaginary thrives on an endlessly repeated process of demarcation and externalization, a process reconstructed best through the changing conditions of film production and reception and the intense emotional reactions generated by what for audiences today are familiar ... historical figures and events” (p. 5). The films play on audience emotions of fascination, horror, and disgust with both events and characters. Following the rules of classical narrative, the films place the main characters within a larger social and political context, develop their personal stories against the backdrop of significant historic events, and use these filmic conventions to examine the relationship between individual and society, subject and state, and citizen and nation (p. 6). The Nazis are defined as the enemy but they rarely are fully developed characters. Typically they appear as stereotypical villains, clichéd madmen, and voiceless, faceless extras. Hake focuses on three recurring features in these films: the heavy reliance on the melodramatic mode, their preoccupation with the problem of masculinity, and the importance of spectatorship and reception to the actualization of their meanings. Overall, Hake seeks to contribute a greater understanding of the ways in which history “offers a conduit to the political in the broadest sense, that is, its institutions, procedures, convention, identifications, and forms of engagement” than scholars have done thus far (p. 7). She believes the affective dimensions of the historical film and their contributions to the meaning of history and memory, as well as to the aestheticization and medicalization of politics, have escaped scholarly attention and attempts to rectify this oversight.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each discussing a period or theme pertaining to films about Nazis produced in Europe and the United States. At times the reading is slowed by dense discussions of theory, but Hake still succeeds in making her main points clear in each chapter. In chapter 1, Hake analyzes films about Nazis produced in the United States between 1939 and 1946. She notes that German refugees to the United States helped shape the image of Nazis in American films during this period, with 180 such films made. The films defined fascism in opposition to democracy, with fascism representing government control and democracy representing personal freedom, encouraging Americans to become more aware of politics and foreign policy in order to oppose the evil of Nazism. Chapters 2 and 3 pro-

vide a comparison of films about Nazis produced in West and East Germany. In chapter 2, Hake demonstrates that West German films linked communism to Nazism in the context of the Cold War as two evil forces that sought to oppress Germans. West German films in the 1950s also raised questions about the Nazi legacy and German guilt, depicting the resistance to Nazism by some Germans in an effort to show that not all Germans were complicit with the evils of fascism. In contrast, in chapter 3 Hake discusses how East German films presented communism/socialism rather than capitalism as the alternative to fascism. East German films placed the origins of fascism in West Germany, thus distancing East Germany from prewar Germany’s Nazi past. Hake argues that these antifascist films helped East Germans identify with Marxism and the Soviet Union. The films emphasized communist victory rather than fascist defeat to define the Soviet Union as a liberator rather than an occupier. Hake turns to the “sexy Nazi” in chapter 4 with a look at Italian cinema. Nazism came to be linked with eroticism in Italian films of the 1970s through the affiliation between sex and domination central to the master-slave relationship Nazis are depicted as having with the people in occupied nations. As Hake points out, the introduction of this theme into films about Nazis corresponds to social and cultural changes taking place after 1968, including the sexual revolution sweeping Western Europe and the United States. In chapter 5, Hake analyzes two postmodern films, *Moloch* (1999) and *Inglorious Bastards* (2009) through the application of Walter Benjamin’s theories on the aestheticization of politics. She demonstrates how the two films represent Russian and American views of Nazism in post-Cold War world. Chapter 6 provides analysis of four recent films from four countries that were occupied by the Germans—France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. The films focus on the theme of resistance and the validation of violence as a political means. Hake discusses how they represent heritage cinema and the ways in which nations dealt with Nazi occupation in postnationalist and transnationalist contexts. They reflect only part of the reality in countries where many people collaborated with the Nazis. Hake shows that audiences respond to films in context of contemporary issues, such as immigration and the war on terror. Finally, in chapter 7, Hake analyzes the film *Downfall* (2004), which looks at German victimization under the Nazis. *Downfall* is an example of how a unified Germany has sought to come to terms with its Nazi past. Hake claims that the film redefines the postfascist imaginary to fit the modern marketing of Nazism for audiences.

While Hake discusses a large number of films about Nazis, her book is not a comprehensive overview of the genre, and she does not claim that it is. She has selected specific films from several nations that allow her to demonstrate the engagement between audience and politics that takes place through these films at specific historical moments. In so doing, the book provides the most attention to films produced in the United States and Germany (East, West, and unified), with significant coverage of Soviet/Russian and Italian films in certain decades. Hake does touch on films from other nations, which provides some good points of comparison, but the book might have benefited from a little more discussion

of films about Nazis produced in nations other than the primary ones addressed. For example, a more thorough examination of British films could provide a greater understanding of the political affect at work during the Cold War in terms of the conflict between capitalism and communism. Similarly, providing more information on the Italian influence on films in other nations might have made that chapter stronger. Overall, Hake does provide an excellent study and valuable new insights into this genre of films, and what flaws there are with the book are minor and seem to be primarily a result of space constraints.

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