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Michael Eckardt. *Zwischenspiele der Filmgeschichte: Zur Rezeption des Kinos der Weimarer Republik in Südafrika 1928-1933.* Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 2008. 487 pp. EUR 56.80, paper, ISBN 978-3-89626-766-5.

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The history of cinema and particularly the history of its earlier, silent variants has remained largely unaffected by the persistent trend to rewrite national histories in light of the cultural, economic, and social connections across political and geographical boundaries. In other words, transnational history and the history of cinema rarely intersect.[1] It is here that Michael Eckardt's *Zwischenspiele der Filmgeschichte* offers its greatest contribution. Tracing the reception of Weimar film in South Africa between 1928 and 1933, Eckardt's work moves beyond the national focus that characterizes the existing literature and offers to fill in the "blank spot" that the history of South African film occupies on the cinematic map of the world (p. 448). Secondly, Eckardt argues that his focus on reception, exhibition, and distribution in a country that had no film production to speak of allows us, in fact forces us, to reconsider the periodization of cinema's history in non-Western countries. He convincingly argues that South African film history did not start with postindependence cinematic production but must be traced back to the moment at which film made first inroads into a South African market. Lastly, *Zwischenspiele* seeks to enrich our understanding of Weimar cinema in a transnational if not world historical context by identifying it as an alternative model for subsequent South African film production.

Before Eckardt turns to Weimar films and their reception in South Africa, he lays out his theoretical apparatus and discusses at considerable length the key texts by Thelma Gutsche, Hans Rompel, and Keyan Tomaselli that demarcate the field of South African film. Eckardt also provides an extensive overview of the economy of cinema in South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s and sketches the larger media landscape since 1800. Categorizing German films screened in South Africa according to four (somewhat arbitrarily defined) genres, Eckardt reconstructs the cinema program during the period of interest and reads those Weimar-era films shown in South Africa against printed reviews and censorship discussions. Unfortunately, the very detailed background laid out in a diligent fashion does not seamlessly connect with the book's primary interventions. The extensive discussion of individual films, with careful attention to plot, cast, and form analysis, remains somewhat disconnected from the context provided in the previous 236 pages.

Eckardt starts out by reiterating that film cannot be understood separately from its cultural context and the everyday connections to its audience and argues that the meaning of film (*Sinnpotential*) only develops as part of its reception by

an audience.[2] Initially proposing to explicate local and regional appropriation of international films shown to local publics and to illustrate the differences in reception of the same films in their colonial and metropolitan contexts, the book unfortunately does not deliver on these rather interesting promises. Eckardt neither approximates Weimar audiences nor does he give the reader a sense of the South Africa film public in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Instead, these audiences and their suggestive "appropriation" appear only as part of Eckardt's repeated speculations. Retaining the focus on reception at the center of his study, Eckardt unfortunately takes some inopportune shortcuts. It remains unclear how *Zwischenspiele* positions itself vis-à-vis existing works on historical reception--the work of Miriam Hansen (*Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* [1991]) and Janet Staiger (*Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* [1992]) might have offered some useful guidance here. The primary evidence for Eckardt's arguments about reception, or more accurately media reception, is based to a large extent on his reading of anonymous film reviews in the press, which, so Eckardt concedes, were often uncritical, flimsy, and intimately bound to market advertisements. The author readily acknowledges that South African film reviews can hardly be compared to Weimar Germany's film critical discourse.

Throughout the book, Eckardt acknowledges the dearth of sources available to gauge audience composition. However, the tentativeness with which the author glosses over the subject of race relations is unsettling. Careful not to ignite a brimming minefield, Eckardt's neglect of the subject of black African publics is problematic at best. Supposedly to avoid confusion, Eckardt's excursion into the demographics explains ethnic markers employed throughout the study, all the while being mindful of the "schwierige Geschichte Südafrikas vor dem Hintergrund der jahrhundertelangen ethnischen Diskriminierungen" (difficult history of South Africa in front of a background of centuries of ethnic discrimination) (p. 53). Among the populations of interest--those historically defined as "whites"--Eckardt distinguishes between English- and Afrikaans-speaking groups and analyzes their respective language press. The "Africans of non-European heritage," a label applied to South Africans previously classified as "non-whites," remain conspicuously absent from Eckardt's analysis. Did "Africans of non-European heritage" not go to the movies at all and if so, were they prevented from doing so by law or by economic hardship? Or is their effacement from this study to be explained by the fact that the author did not have access or only insufficient access to Bantu-language sources? Are there potential other factors that explain the exclusion of the largest population group from an analysis deliberately interested in film reception and moviegoing publics? Eckardt only hints on answers to these questions. He suggests that the lion's share of moviegoers came from the English- and Afrikaans-speaking population, an interesting fact that would merit explication. Eckardt moreover notes that black South Africans had only limited access to an even more limited number of theaters and hence newspapers with a black African readership were "disinclined" to cover film news in their already scanty pages (p. 105). By focusing on the newspapers printed in English and Afrikaans, Eckardt sidesteps the issue of race relations, exploitation, and blatant racism that finds reflection in the sources. This is a significant flaw in an otherwise noteworthy work that suggests interesting new venues for further research.

Seeking to explain the sudden increase of German film in South African theaters, Eckardt provocatively suggests that film production is hardly the defining feature of cinematic history. But apparently, neither are public preferences. Rather than attributing the change in cinema fare to the artistic genius of Weimar film, Eckardt provides a refreshing perspective on cinema's history and demonstrates that the rapid and short-lived

increase of German films in the South African market reflected the circumstances of the reception context and not a deliberate initiative on the side of film production. He suggests that supply and demand for German films in South Africa formed a near ideal-typical symbiosis as the monopoly of South Africa's largest distributor, the Schlesinger Organization, found its hegemony challenged by a single competitor, Kinemas. As the world economic crisis put German film producers under considerable pressure, German fare provided the South African Kinemas with an opportunity to challenge the monopoly of its sole competitor. As a result, German films came to constitute a stable feature in South African theaters until roughly 1930 when the transition to sound film (and the obvious difficulties of translatability) coincided with the reassertion of the Schlesinger monopoly. German film, Eckardt argues, offered a "fresh look" in addition to unfamiliar faces and story lines that markedly differed from the dominant Hollywood fare (p. 437). More than a mere makeshift, Weimar cinema, Eckardt further asserts, constituted a vantage point for the conceptualization of postindependence South African national cinema. This claim is one of Eckardt's most suggestive and interesting interpretations. Without suggesting that the book ought to have been longer, I would have liked to see Eckardt take the analysis further and show which elements of Weimar cinema found reflection in postindependent South African film. Such an excursion not only would have strengthened the transnational claims of the study but would also have further allowed the reader to see how everyday economic pressures find reflection in film production.

In part due to its length and attention to minute detail *Zwischenspiele* may not speak to undergraduate students or a general audience. However, it offers a welcome new perspective to the film historian. Eckardt's provocative reconsideration of the periodization of cinematic history takes its cues from exhibition rather than production. His venture into unchartered territory by taking a first transnational turn for German film will hopefully inspire emulation.

Notes

[1]. There are, however, noteworthy exceptions. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, eds., *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (Abington: Routgledge, 2006); and Kilbourn Russell, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (New York: Routlegde, 2010); as well as several contributions in Diana Robin and Ira Jaffe, eds., *Redirecting the Gaze: Gender, Theory, and Cinema in the Third World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) suggest that exception to this rule are becoming more numerous.

[2]. Similar claims have been made by the no longer so very New Film History. See in particular the collection of sources interspersed with scholarly essays that chronicle the moviegoing experience in the United States, Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Also important for the U.S. context is a superb collection of essays edited by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). For the European context, see in particular Richard Abel's work on early French cinema, Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). For a more general perspective on the place of silent film in early twentieth-century culture, see Richard Abel, ed., *Silent Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

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[3] Janet Staiger, ***Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Miriam Hansen, ***Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*** (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).

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