



**Maria Fritsche.** *The American Marshall Plan Film Campaign and the Europeans: A Captivated Audience?*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 360 pp. \$114.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-00935-6.

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The European Recovery Program, or the Marshall Plan as it is more commonly known, was an ambitious attempt by the United States to reconstruct Europe's war-ravaged economy in the wake of World War II. In this carefully crafted book, Maria Fritsche explores the cultural dimensions of this operation by looking at a body of films—the Marshall Plan films (MP films)—that were made under the program's auspices. A professor of history at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Fritsche excavated an abundance of primary sources in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Austria. The fruits of this multinational, multi-archival research show in her in-depth analysis of the production, diffusion, and consumption of the MP films. Relying on the framework of “cultural transfer,” the author also illustrates the interactive dynamic of US policymakers, European filmmakers, and European publics in productive ways.

According to Fritsche, the MP film campaign originated from the Special Media Section of the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) and was subsequently carried out by the Mutual Security Agency and the United States Information Agency (USIA). In order to effectively connect with diverse audiences across the Atlantic, US offi-

cialists recruited European filmmakers—mostly white, male, and middle-class—who yielded some two hundred films for the program. Released between 1948 and 1954, most of them were documentary shorts, while some were animations and fictional narratives.

Although diverse in content, MP films, argues Fritsche, constituted several broader patterns. Early productions tended to underscore the rehabilitation of industry, agriculture, and infrastructure. Many touted the virtues of productivity, such as *The Machine at Work*, which celebrated mechanization over the handmade production of goods. In celebrating cultural diversity and “common legac[ies]” (p.140), MP films often called for the creation of a united Europe. Later narratives went on to stress the achievements of the Marshall Plan, while calling for the rearmament and defense of the “free world.” While clearly in support of liberal capitalist values, these on-screen products generally avoided the depiction of communism, though a handful of works, such as *Air of Freedom* and *Without Fear*, painted a Manichean worldview in which communism posed an existential threat. Women were only marginally present. In rare instances, they appeared as workers, consumers, and housewives,

but for the most part, the communities depicted in the MP films were “truly a man’s world” (p. 29).

Fritsche is cautious in assessing the films’ impact on European audiences. Screened both commercially and noncommercially, MP films appeared in movie theaters as well as schools, libraries, town halls, and outdoor public spaces—often with the help of mobile film units and projectors. The lineup of films was carefully tailored for each country to maximize their overall effectiveness. Yet even while the screenings did engage large audiences in both urban and rural settings, these films, at times, faced popular resistance—from Greek viewers who opposed the integration of Europe or Austrian farmers who disliked the mechanization of agriculture, for example. In spite of the US government’s tireless efforts, MP films, the author claims, were not powerful enough to “sway European minds to the extent the ECA had hoped” (p. 225). The success of the propaganda program thus “seemed elusive” (p. 231).

Fritsche addresses the limits of the MP film program within the larger dynamic of Europe’s postwar “Americanization.” Her assessment is balanced and fair-minded. However, while offering a brief comparison to Hollywood’s transatlantic operation (mostly in the conclusion), her study is largely confined to the MP film program itself. One thus wonders how this cinematic campaign fared in contrast to other US government-sponsored cultural programs—for instance, ones by the Office of War Information, the Office of Military Government of the United States (in Austria and Germany), the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers in Japan (specifically its Civil Information and Education Section), and the USIA after 1954. The book also leaves room for discussion on the question of resistance. In examining the production side of the MP film program, Fritsche claims that a “genuine harmony” seems to have existed between European filmmakers and ECA (p. 178), but she also shows that some, such as

Danish documentarist Theodor Christensen, expressed opposition to ECA’s policy initiatives (p. 96). To what extent, then, did resistance shape the attitudes of the filmmaking community, particularly since many in the documentary field were influenced by the Left? Did MP films fully conform to US agendas, or did filmmakers subvert and counteract, for instance, via stylistic, aesthetic, and cultural expression? Are there traces of counterhegemonic acts—overt or subtle—in the films that were approved by US officials?

Such quibbles aside, *The American Marshall Film Campaign and the Europeans* is a solid study that teaches us a lot about MP films and their role in shaping transatlantic affairs during the early Cold War. Readers interested in cinema, cultural policy, and international relations will greatly benefit from this volume.

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