

Brief survey of the situation and our
standpoint regarding the research and
the development of German film.

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The investigation of the history of German film and its development up to the present day is still at its outset. Though some important publications are available (authors like Lotte H. Eisner, Siegfried Kraquaer, Rudolf Kurtz, Friedrich von Zglinicki and other can be mentioned), the scientific value for modern research is on the whole limited. They represent valuable preparatory work or collections of material, but the conception of the analysis does not correspond with our general and special sight of history. Basing on Historical Materialism, we are not only engaged with film history from the angle of form or style, neither from the sole standpoint of economy and sociology, but we attempt to comprehend the development of film in its political and historical totality, understanding it as depending both on historical and on individual factors. It must be added, that - with few exceptions - there are no older and experienced film historians doing research work in the GDR. Young film scientists and historians had to be waited for, whose primary task of course consisted in helping to solve the problems of present-day film making. Nonetheless, they have begun with elaborating a number of lectures on the period of the silent and the development of German film in the years after 1945. There will soon be founded a film research centre, which beside problems of theory will mainly have to deal with German film history, adapting a progressive historical viewpoint. Traditions of progressive and artistic value are to be acknowledged and generalized as to their significance for the present film making.

Having regard to the above-mentioned situation, we are now proceeding mainly with some methodical and other special problems of German film research.

The beginnings of film in Germany, as to time and technique, are similar to those in other significant film-producing countries. It is on Nov. 1st, 1895, that the Skladanowsky brothers by means of their "bioscope" first present short films during a vaudeville-programme in the "Berliner Wintergarten". Camera and projector are self-constructed. One year later they use the projecting apparatus of Oscar Meester, who after his invention of the Maltese cross builds a series of projectors and by this becomes the founder of the first German cinematographic industry. From Nov. 1896, Messter works with self-built cameras and opens the professional production of films. In 1897 he sets up a small studio, shooting there the first indoor-scenes. - Up to 1913 there is no film to which the term of ~~the~~ "art" could be attributed. The cinema-programme consists 80 or 90 per cent. of foreign films, particularly French, Italian, Danish, later American. Finally, the working after a literary script and the turning of outstanding stage-actors to film marks the development of the German "Art-Film". The famous stage-performers Albert Bassermann and Paul Wegener are marking the start with their films "Der Andere" and "Der Student von Prag" (both 1913). Particularly Paul Wegener with his phantastic-romantic and legendary subjects gave shape to the German film for nearly one decade. Already in his first films he anticipates certain expressionist formative elements which were to attain their absolute and never regained perfection in "Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari".

Already these beginnings are bearing the trait which was to become so fatal for the further development of German film: the tendency of withdrawing in theme and subject from the social and political reality, of escaping into remote reveries and romantic illusions. And whenever authors and directors do deal with problems of society, treating for example war and inflation, the moral and the efficacy of the films are frequently diminished by expressionist and abstractly symbolic distortions. It must of course not be omitted that expressionism gave rise to many new means of form, particularly of the kind which helped to make transparent and distinctly visible the interior of the soul. Thus the atmosphere made of light and shadow, the stylized décors, which in "Caligari" for the first

time came to play a leading expressive role, the technical tricks and special effects, double exposures etc., and later the manifold movements and shooting-angles of the camera: all were means and forms to give the actors new dimensions and expressivity. It is by these expressionist elements of style that some German films of the first half of the twenties evoke the special interest of film historians. As characteristic examples of that period can be named: "Der müde Tod" (1921) and "Dr. Mabuse der Spieler" (1922) by Fritz Lang; "Nosferatu" (1922) and "Der letzte Mann" (1924) by Frank Murnau; "Das Wachsfigurenkabinett" (1924) by Paul Leni; "Der Schatz" (1923) and "Geheimnisse einer Seele" (1926) by G.W. Pabst.

- The themes, still open to exact investigation by German research, go at that time from the influence of the Reinhardt-theatre, painting and literature on the film - from the beginnings of misinterpretation of history (more outright in the UFA - production to come) in the big historical pictures of Ernst Lubitsch ("Madame Dubarry" 1919, "Anna Boleyn" 1920) - down to the partly conscient, partly inconscient way-making for German fascism in films like "Nibelungen" (1923/24) by Fritz Lang and the heap of Prussian-militaristic films like the first "Fridericus Rex" (1921).

The shaping of German cinematography into a big monopoly was brought about in the last years of war, when influential groups of the general staff, the banks and the industry came to see the possibilities of film for influencing the masses by "ideological warfare". The film industry on the other hand was hoping for economic support by the government. In 1916 the "Deutsche Lichtbildgesellschaft e.V. (Deulig)" and in Nov. 1917 the "Universum Film AG (UFA)" were founded. This was the beginning of the economic and consequently ideological alliance of the German film (with very few exceptions) to powerful militarist and capitalist groups, which was to become so fatal. Till 1945 the UFA develops into the biggest European film trust. The German film market is burdened with cheapest amusement stuff, displaying luxurious décors, stars and sentimental trash. The few realistic pictures of artistic value are mainly made by small and independent

productions. These were above all "Prometheus Film G.m.b.H.", "Nero Film" and "Filmstudio 1929". The majority of films dealing with social problems and being of artistic value are handicapped by the attempt of solving problems only in the individual and psychological sphere. The German Film is made mostly in the unnatural atmosphere of the studios, away from the genuine reality of life. This can be said of most all of the films of this kind: "Die Hintertreppe" (1921 by Paul Leni and Leopold Jessner; "Die Straße" (1923) by Karl Grunc; "Die freudlose Gasse" (1925) by G.W. Pabst; "Dirnentragödie" (1927) by Bruno Rahn and even Gerhart Lamprecht's film "Die Ver-rufenen" (1925). Lamprecht's ^{film} was the first of a series of films influenced by the work of the popular Berlin painter Heinrich Zille. Remarkable in them are the new theme and subject, entailing new formal means to the German silent. These were elements of a realistic film art of the very kind as discovered at the same time by Eisenstein and Pudowkin, who exerted considerable influence on progressive artists in Germany. Whenever the possibility is given, one now leaves the studio and takes the camera to shoot the genuine milieu. Professional actors are abandoned in favour of adequate types "from the street". Though the camera turns to documentary life and topics which really move the masses of the people, it is only observing and recording the events and does not yet give them an interpretation. - All these pictures are outdone both in truth of life and in the depth and variety of expression by Piel Jutzi's "Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück" (1924). This film marks a climax in the realistic representation of life in the period of the silent, which in combining documentary and story-film elements, the fate of the man and the individual, directly leads to the problems of present-day film making.

The German film - also according to the judgement of internationally renowned film-critics - is the quickest to find its way in mastering sound and speech in an artistic manner. Films like "Der blaue Engel", "Westfront 1918", "M", "Dreigroschenoper", "Mädchen in Uniform" and others are far away from the silent without abandoning cinematic peculiarity.

On the contrary: the specialty of the genre is enriched by new qualities and a new dramaturgy is born. With all esteem for these works one cannot fail to see that through the influence of capitalist producers the screen-version of "Die Dreigroschenoper" (G.W. Pabst, 1931) contains much less critical tendency than Berholt Brecht's literary model. Much the same it was with Heinrich Mann's novel "Professor Unrat", screened by Joseph v. Sternberg under the title "Der blaue Engel" in 1930. Likewise Robert Siodmak's "Abschied" (1930), which despite remarkable realism in detail does not step beyond the merely contemplative viewpoint of the petty bourgeois. "Kuhle Wampe" (directed by Slatan Dudow, scenetic by Bert Brecht and E. Ottwald) was the only sound-film continuing the development of socialist realism, the beginning of which was "Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück". In this work the interesting formal experiment serves to truthfully express burning up-to-date problems. Its creators point out questions which millions of German workers were faced with in those years, and strive to give a valuable answer.

In the immediately following period of the hierarchy of Hitler-fascism the German film with few exceptions submerges into absolute depravity (including the so-called non-political amusement-picture which is made to make forget the brutal doings of fascism and its total war). No wonder, that in this time the German film, though technically perfecting itself, remains sterile as to the development of new forms and expressions.

Nonetheless, we have to investigate thoroughly, how far and in which forms a few film-makers manifest in their works a critical attitude towards fascism. For example Helmut Käutner in "Romanze in Moll" (1943) or Erich Engel in "Der Maulkorb" (1939), a picture in which through a historical theme the reactionary Prussian state-machinery is effectively satirized. It is likewise important to see that official institutions of the regime were soon boycotting films as e. g. "Friedrich Schiller" (1940), because they disagree with their tendencies. Another problem to investigate is the artistic work of German film makers abroad in emigration.

The year 1946 - apart from the preparing steps of immediate post-war time - marks the beginning of a new era in German film art. The DEFA, Berlin-Babelsberg, is the first German production licensed by the that-time Soviet Military Administration. It takes up the making of films under completely new social and economic conditions. Work is now done under the conditions of antifascist-democratic order, capitalist interest and influence on production, distribution and exploitation being absolutely eliminated. These institutions are now given into the hands of the people and are subject to democratic control. The first result already, "Die Mörder sind unter uns" (Wolfgang Staudte, 1946), meets world-wide interest above all on account of its dealing with up-to-date problems, but no less because of its interesting style. The critical realism, imbued with passionate antifascist -democratic ideology, attains its height in "Ehe im Schatten" (Kurt Maetzig, 1947); "Affäre Blum" (Erich Engel, 1948); "Rotation" (Wolfgang Staudte, 1949); "Die Buntkarierten" (Kurt Maetzig, 1949). Such prevailingly antifascist subjects make their way ahead to "Der Untertan" (Wolfgang Staudte, 1951) and up to recent days (e.g. "Lissy", Konrad Wolf, 1957). Socialist realism is proving more and more the main tendency of present film making in the GDR, combining the forerunners of about 1930 ("Mutter Krausens Fahrt ins Glück", "Kuhle Wampe") with the new side, which first took shape in "Unser täglich Brot" (Slatan Dudow, 1949). This purposeful development of socialist realism in our cinematography is conditioned by the construction of the base of socialism in our society and on the working of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism, which are the guide of the most progressive of our artists. Outstanding examples of the rise of this new artistic quality in the sphere of historical or biographical subject are the films "Ernst Thälmann" (Kurt Maetzig, 1953, 1955) ; "Stärker als die Nacht" (Slatan Dudow, 1955); in present-day subject films like "Das verurteilte Dorf" (Martin Hellberg, 1952); "Geheimakten Solvay" (Martin Hellberg, 1953) and "Schlösser und Katen" (Kurt Maetzig, 1956).

The artistic mastering of new theme and subject brought up and still is bringing a great deal of difficulty. In a number of films made in recent years, the idea appears in some degree as "raw material", insufficiently worked into art.

Dogmatical & conceptions of esthetics and film theory also contributed to the making of several stereotype or merely illustrative pictures. The recent films of the DEFA, however, obviously prove that this deficiency is being overcome. They display affirmation of socialist realism along with a great variety of individual style, genre and subject. The remarkable fact may be mentioned that more and more film makers are attracted to up-to-date subjects and seek to discover the new reality in seemingly "little" everyday events and among the plain people (e.g. "Berliner Romanze", Gerhard Klein, 1956; "Berlin-Ecke Schönhauser", Gerhard Klein, 1957; "Vergeßt mir meine Traudel nicht", Kurt Maetzig, 1957).

Of course, also in Western Germany quite a number of films of artistic value have been made, some of them critically dealing with the social conditions of present time. The directors Helmut Käutner and Harald Braun are particularly to be mentioned. Since detailed research work after 1945 is not available, no judgement in this short form can be given.