

BEFORE THE COLLAPSE

by Avner Shapira Haaretz 14 01 2011

Working just a few years prior to the Nazi takeover, German film directors used such themes as madness, prostitution, and mass murder to set a liberal agenda for the public discourse. A new book explores the complex film world of the Weimar Republic

In the fall of 1929, the film "Poison Gas" was released in Germany. It told the fictional story of an engineer who tries to prevent the commercial use of the gas he helped manufacture. However, his efforts cause an accident in the gas factory and fumes are released into the air of a large city, killing its inhabitants. At the end of the film, the ghosts of those who were poisoned by the gas are joined by the ghosts of World War I soldiers, and all of them march together to the city's commercial center. Surrounded by illuminated shop window displays, they cry: "Be human!"

The historian Dr. Ofer Ashkenazi recounts the story of "Poison Gas" at the start of his new book, "A Walk into the Night" (Hebrew; published by Am Oved and the Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem). His analysis focuses on the concepts of reason and subjectivity as reflected in the cinema of the Weimar Republic during the brief but tempestuous period between the end of the First World War in 1918 and the rise of Nazism to power in 1933.

"'Poison Gas' is an excellent example of the themes I am engaged with in the book," Ashkenazi says. "It is a film that is now totally forgotten, and is not part of the cinematic canon that ostensibly represents the Weimar period. Watching it today is a harrowing experience. It ends with an orgy of indiscriminate death caused by a toxic gas that was manufactured by opportunistic and greedy German industrialists.

"It is very tempting to see the film as a prophetic allegory of what occurred in Central and Eastern Europe little more than a decade after its production," he continues. "But plainly, the director of the film, Michail Dubson, who immigrated to Berlin from Minsk in the late 1920s, could not have imagined that scenario. He was concerned about a different apocalypse, in which the values of a consumer society - where people are measured and set themselves apart according to the products they buy - are integrated into the logic of the capitalist assembly line. A society of this kind, the film says, annuls the individual's freedom and leads to violent madness resembling a war situation."

The public reception of "Poison Gas" illustrates a central theme of the book: that German cinema of the period was a vibrant, vitally important arena for conducting a public debate. According to Ashkenazi, the conservative German right objected strenuously to the messages contained in Dubson's film and saw to it that the censorship office - an institution often enlisted by the right wing during this period - restricted the film to adult viewers, to protect "heavy industry in Germany." At the same time, he notes, "The film did not serve as communist propaganda against capitalism - as witnessed also by the mocking reviews by critics in left-wing papers - but worked to reshape liberal values in the spirit of

the Enlightenment heritage in an urban reality that was utterly different from what those who conceived the Enlightenment had envisaged."

Acceptance of the stranger

The principal questions Ashkenazi addresses in his comprehensive and eye-opening book are these: To what extent did the cinema of the Weimar era truly reflect the values of enlightened Europe? And how did the filmmakers attempt to project optimism and grope their way in the dark - the social, economic and political uncertainty that often descended on Germany during the 15-year democratic prelude to Hitler? Ashkenazi, 37, is a research fellow at the Koebner Minerva Center and has taught at the Hebrew University, UC Berkeley and the University of Haifa. With Hagai Barnea and Shamir Yeger he edits the online journal *Slil*, dedicated to the study of history through film and television. He was interviewed by telephone from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he is a visiting assistant professor in 2010-2011.

What is the attitude of current historical research toward Weimar cinema, and what differentiates your study from earlier approaches?

Ashkenazi: "Until recent years, many scholars tended to read the films of the Weimar Republic from the end to the beginning. In other words, to interpret them in light of the tragedy that marked the end of the period - the rise of Nazism. There were three main research trends: nostalgia for the period of openness and creativity that Nazism allegedly brought to an abrupt end; astonishment at a culture that was not coping - whether from escapism or lack of awareness - with the crises of the time, an approach encapsulated in the metaphor of 'dancing on the slopes of a volcano'; and the interpretation of Weimar culture as a manifestation of the 'approaching signs' of the 'inevitable' advent of Nazism.

"It was the third approach that bore the greatest influence on a few generations of scholars, thanks particularly to two fascinating books that were written in the period after the Second World War by Jewish immigrants from Germany, Lotte H. Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer. In her book 'The Haunted Screen,' Eisner linked the cinema of the Weimar period to the cultural tradition of German Romanticism, noting especially its irrational and anti-liberal thrusts.

Kracauer, for his part, offered a psychological analysis of the 'German psyche' and saw in the films of the time an expression of the two dominant if contradictory impulses: the attraction to the powerful tyrant and, on the other hand, the longing for chaos. According to Kracauer, these two impulses made possible the rise of Nazism, so he thought he could find continuity between the monsters who appeared on the silver screen and those in the real world. The connection was obvious in the title he chose for his book, 'From Caligari to Hitler' - that is, from the murderous villain in the 1920 film 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' to the future leader of Germany.

"More recently, historians and film scholars have found it difficult to accept the assumptions of Eisner, Kracauer and others like them. Present-day studies are suspicious of generalizations about the 'Germany psyche' or 'Germany's special path' and look for complex explanations of the processes undergone by the German society and German politics after the First World War. Access to a broad range of archival material, including many films recently discovered or restored, has led current film researchers to underscore the films' variety and abundance,

in place of the uniform message found by their predecessors. My study belongs to these new tendencies; I try to find lines of resemblance between the various films amid this abundance and to understand the change over time."

To write the book, Ashkenazi viewed about 130 films and perused advertising posters, programs distributed to the audience at premieres, and press reviews. "The examples in the book analyze the films in light of the historical contexts of the period of their release, but without the burden of the future catastrophe. They present German cinema of the time as a central means of expression for young immigrants, many of them Jews, who were interested in creating a bourgeois-liberal society and in the possibility of that society accepting the stranger and those who were different (including homosexuals, women, Jews, Chinese and others). "There is no nostalgia here and no accusation of disregarding 'the volcano.' The films I discuss dealt relentlessly with the crises that characterized the period: the feeling that it was difficult to distinguish between madness and reason, the notion that existing concepts of identity and affiliation were no longer appropriate to the urban experience, and the threat posed by conservative and nationalist approaches. However, these films sought to suggest a solution to the crises in the light of a liberal outlook based on principles of social justice deriving from balanced judgment and compassion. This viewpoint also incorporated a transnational concept, according to which the identity of a homeland - ethnic or national - is secondary to the shared world of values of the members of the community. The fact that these ideas were put forward at the heart of the mass culture during the years that preceded the rise of Nazism leaves us with a complicated, multifaceted and nuanced picture of a modern society before its collapse."

Liberal agenda

Ashkenazi's book sheds light on several outstanding Weimar filmmakers who, despite their success at the time, have been erased from the collective memory. One of them is Richard Oswald, who was born in 1880 as Richard Ornstein to a Jewish family in Vienna. After a few years as a theater actor on second-rate stages in Austria and Germany, he moved to Berlin and entered the world of film. As an actor, director, screenwriter and producer, he was involved in the making of more than 100 films between 1914 and 1933.

"Oswald is important not only because of the number of films he took part in, but also because he effectively discovered some of the big stars of the German cinema, developed distinctive genres and dealt in his films with urgent political and social issues in a way that attracted large viewing audiences," Ashkenazi says. "In his series of 'educational' films, for instance, he addressed social problems stemming from sexual violence and 'abnormal' sexual behavior - that is, phenomena deemed criminal, such as homosexuality and prostitution. It is easy to dismiss these films as a mere sexual sensationalism, but Oswald was actually preaching the acceptance of the other - especially those who were 'biologically' different, as his 1919 film 'Different from the Others' presents its homosexual hero - and understanding for the 'deviant' as a victim of social injustice - as the prostitutes in his films are depicted.

"Many of his other films deal with questions of identity and with definitions of non-national identity. For example, the protagonist in the 1927 film 'The Incredible Transformation of Dr. Bessel' is a patriotic German officer who in the

middle of the First World War finds himself behind enemy lines and has to pretend to be a French soldier in order to survive. He is wounded and sent to Marseille, the supposed home of the soldier whose identity he stole. There he learns that the members of the urban middle class on both sides of the border belong to a common community that espouses the same universe of values and norms. When the Nazis took power and started to censor his films, Oswald left Germany and continued to make films in Western Europe and afterward in the United States. Unlike many other filmmakers, though, he was unable to integrate into the American film industry."

Another successful Jewish filmmaker in Weimar Germany was Joe May, the pseudonym of Julius Mandl, who like Oswald was born in 1880 in Vienna and moved to Berlin. According to Ashkenazi, "May conceived, produced and directed the most popular films of the period: exotic tales of adventure that took their heroes - Western city dwellers - to the ends of the earth and into various historical eras. In the book I argue that the encounters between the modern hero and the exotic world in May's films effectively showed the German audience different systems of law and order and diverse approaches to the question of what determines a person's identity. Viewers could see for themselves the ruinous results of racist outlooks and of judicial systems that were incapable of deciding objectively what had occurred. In the end, the protagonists moved back from Africa or Asia to the modern European city in order to reform the bourgeois society, to shape an urban community based on justice and reason.

"May was a mentor and a source of inspiration to the most famous directors in Germany, such as Fritz Lang, who set out to emulate his ambition to make 'the most magnificent movies in the world.' In 1933, May too was compelled to leave Germany and reached Hollywood. Like Oswald, the films he made in America were commercial failures (including anti-Nazi films he made during the war). Most scholars have ignored May, as they have Oswald, in part because Kracauer described him in his book as providing cheap thrills to the 'German psyche,' which was tormented by the defeat in the war. My book tries to present a different picture, namely that these filmmakers effectively set the liberal agenda that dominated the German cinema screen in the 1920s."

In what measure was the German cinema truly German from the point of view of the phenomena it dealt with and the means it used to that end?

"That issue is at the center of the book, and not only because, like Oswald and May, many German filmmakers in both the popular and artistic realms could be seen as 'foreigners' both nationally and ethnically. We also have to remember that the myth of a distinctive German cinema, which exhibits the uniqueness of the 'German spirit,' was invented in the 1920s by marketing people who wanted to brand the movies being produced in Berlin in order to sell them to a Western audience. In practice, the German production companies, including UFA, the flagship, which was established by the German Defense Ministry in World War I, frequently cooperated with American or European companies to make films that would sell worldwide.

"Moreover, the German filmmakers always had their eyes on the major film industries in Hollywood and Moscow. They wanted to replicate their successful formulas or, alternatively, make the kind of film that the Americans and the

Soviets 'would never do' - as Fritz Lang explained the idea for his 1927 film 'Metropolis'.

"More important, though, the films I describe in the book were not 'national,' as they presented and disseminated a worldview holding that nationality was a secondary element compared to a trans-border European identity, one with a common cultural tradition and common values. For the post-World War I German filmmakers, it was a purely imagined world, far from the reality they had experienced. However, they succeeded in presenting the need for such outlooks and the danger entailed in their loss in a way that enticed many viewers and became part of the urban popular culture. By the way, unlike post-World War II scholars, many of the 1920s film critics acknowledged, and cherished, this approach. In 1929, when talking pictures began to be made in Germany, the critics lamented 'the end of the transnational film.' Hearing the language, they claimed, would for the first time bring about the revelation of national tradition and national ideology in films."

Between madness and reality

A useful way to sum up the highly diverse road traveled by films in the Weimar Republic is to compare two works dealing with madness, one from the start of the era and the other from its end. Both films were released (or were intended for release) proximate to key historical events. The first is one of the most famous films of the era, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," directed by Robert Wiene, which arrived in German movie theaters at the end of February 1920, about two weeks before the Kapp Putsch (the right-wing insurrection led by Wolfgang Kapp, who seized power in Berlin for a few days). The second is Lang's "The Last Testament of Dr. Mabuse." Its premiere was set for March 23, 1933, the day on which the Reichstag enacted a law that transferred lawmaking from the parliament to the government, hastening the emergence of the Nazi dictatorship. However, the minister of propaganda, Josef Goebbels, had already banned the screening of the film - the last one made by Lang in Germany before he fled to America and launched a successful Hollywood career.

"Both films," Ashkenazi notes, "address an issue that preoccupied many filmmakers during the few years of the Weimar Republic: the possibility of distinguishing between the rational and the irrational, of separating madness from the reality outside the cinema. The two films show the horror of a situation in which the differentiation cannot be made. At the end of 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' the viewers do not know whether Caligari is a murderous psychopath or a psychiatrist who wants to cure a patient who in his hallucinations identifies him as a murderer. As several scholars noted, the set design of the film blurs the dichotomy between reality and illusion. After a brief opening, the film presents a hallucinatory story told by a ward in a psychiatric hospital against an animated backdrop and lighting that emphasizes the artificiality of the imagery. However, at the end of the story, when the viewers return to the modern institution, the heavily shadowed expressionist set continues to dominate the field of vision and leaves a lingering doubt: Is this another part of the madman's story, or is the physician really also the murderer?"

"Still, many other films, especially those made at the end of the 1920s, though consisting of similar plots, had far more optimistic endings. In them the filmmakers spotlighted a point of view from which it is possible to distinguish

exactly between the 'real' and the 'hallucinatory.' When Lang returned to this theme in 'Dr. Mabuse' he thrust the viewers once again into Caligari's universe of images. Again it is the director of the psychiatric institution, the physician who is supposed to distinguish between madness and rationality, who sends people to murder in his name - without himself being able to control the murderous impulse. But Lang goes further and depicts the acts of murder, the chaos and the feeling of helplessness they generate by means of a complex use of the soundtrack: The noise produced by the urban street and the modern media are both a means of heightening the realism of the film and a presentiment of the penetration of madness into normal experience.

"As in 'Caligari,'" Ashkenazi sums up, "the consequences of the inability to tell madness from reality are horrifying. In contrast to 'Caligari,' however, the viewers who were supposed to walk out of Lang's film into the bustling city streets could not feel a sense of relief at the difference between the reality depicted in the film and their own day-to-day life. It was their city that fell apart before their eyes on the screen and the last words of the hapless police inspector in the film aptly describe the condition of the liberal bourgeoisie in Germany at the beginning of 1933: 'There is nothing more for us to do here.'"