BOOK REVIEWS • COMPTES RENDUS

Edited by Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager

Reviewed by Brigitta B. Wagner

At the turn of the millennium, German film historian Eric Rentschler published a seminal piece that traced the institutional changes responsible for the shift from the politically engaged New German Cinema (along the lines of Fassbinder, Kluge, Wenders, and Herzog) to a post-1989 “cinema of consensus.” An early proponent both of the study of cinema in North American German departments and the study of 1970s leftist West German film in film departments, Rentschler was understandably perturbed by the postwall German film industry’s new emphasis on box office success, generic formulas, film-television co-production structures, commercially biased subsidy boards, Americanised distribution, and individual, not nationally rooted, self-understandings and dramatic conflicts.1 Although acknowledging an “ardent nostalgia” for the formally experimental oeuvre of postwar auteurs (contemporaries of and participants in the revolutionary concerns of the 1968 generation) and calling for a more measured critical exploration of the latest incarnation of German film, Rentschler’s essay in effect betrays a disdain for this “unabashedly conventional” 1990s cinema.2 Far from the utopian political impulses of its forebears, this cinema seemed suddenly too free of national identity, too unencumbered by the German past, too dangerously inclusive of a heterogeneous population, and too imitative of Hollywood; and it did not address international markets.

Even as 1990s European cinema more generally maintained national and local idiosyncrasies in the face of transnational Europeanisation and the globally hegemonic American entertainment industry and thus secured the brands “English,” “German,” or “French” in a legal sense, (West) Germany’s purported loss of cinematic legitimacy in the immediate postwall era has been a hard pill for scholars of German cinema to swallow. In the intervening years, Rentschler’s observations have challenged a new generation of German film experts to re-examine the politics within and beyond consensus films and to scan the horizons for other modes of cinematic politicization. It is this task that Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager’s edited volume, The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, assumes.

The timing of this anthology could not be better. Just as its title refers to the
“collapse of the conventional German film” declared by the young filmmakers who signed the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962, Fisher and Prager hail what they term “the collapse of consensual filmmaking.” The conceit of both “collapses” is of course that a period of cinematic normalization, whether postwar or postwall postwall, precedes a renewal of aesthetic energies and that the artistic output of the present therefore deserves heightened critical attention. In other words, there is once again work to be done.

While the Oberhauseners’ arrogant dismissal of ‘Papas Kino’ (well-made genre films for the masses) short-changed the critical interventions of numerous 1950s directors (one thinks, for example, of the films of Wolfgang Staudte and Bernhard Wicki), it is not Fisher and Prager’s project to discredit the productions of the 1990s. Rather, they introduce a millennial periodisation that demarcates a new era in All-German filmmaking—one in which unified Germany is no longer a concept-in-the-making but a place structured by new borders, migrants, and transnational alliances as well as the East and West German past and selective memories of National Socialism, World War II, and the Holocaust. The editors avoid the separation of contemporary German cinema into what they call “bad ideological films” and “good cultural critical films,” and turn their attention, instead, to the variety of films produced in the past fifteen years or so. Since the mid-1990s the German film industry has fostered films that appeal both to domestic and international audiences, often negotiating competing notions of what cultural relevance and legibility mean, stylistically and narratively. The processes and policies that surround pre-production, production, distribution, exhibition, and reception tend to reveal the tensions of this attempt at multiple address and have become fertile ground for scholarly inquiry.

The Collapse of the Conventional locates new contexts and points of interest in several films that have begun to enter the canon of postwall film courses and scholarly debate. From Oliver Hirschbiegel’s controversial bunker drama Downfall (2004) to Hans Weingartner’s generation-Y take on terrorism in The Edukators (2005), Margarethe von Trotta’s good German woman in Rosenstraße (2003), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s good Stasi officer in The Lives of Others (2006), or Sönke Wortmann’s anticipation and celebration of the 2006 World Cup through the 1950s’ World-Cup set period piece, The Miracle of Bern (2003), or the documentary Germany: A Summer’s Fairy Tale (2006), the films featured in this volume span historical and contemporary themes and represent the work of multiple generations of German filmmakers, many of whom have managed to reach the elusive international market. While, in North America, historical films such as Downfall, Rosenstraße, and The Lives of Others enjoyed theatrical release, critical attention, and praise from the foreign film set, the scholars of The Collapse of the Conventional work, importantly, to place these films in dialogue with earlier German film traditions and historical representations and larger questions of genre and aesthetically embedded critique. These
films thus regain some of the nuance of a specific moment of production lost in intercultural mobility.

The anthology is hardly exhaustive of all quarters of contemporary German production. One wonders, for example, why Fatih Akin’s oeuvre (with an emphasis on Head-On, 2004 and The Edge of Heaven, 2007) is relegated to the introduction, why someone as prolific and acclaimed as DEFA-trained Andreas Dresen (Night Shapes, 1997, Grill Point, 2002, and Summer in Berlin, 2005) is barely mentioned, and why the Berlin school appears to be a male endeavour when it is indeed one area where women filmmakers (Angela Schanelec, Valeska Grisebach, Maren Ade, and Maria Speth) are particularly well represented.

Still, taken as a whole, the contributions to Fisher and Prager’s volume provide ample expansion of German film studies. The essays take seriously questions of spatial representation, new spectatorial alignments, gendered geographies, regained utopian urges, and evocations of genre. While Johannes von Moltke and Kristin Kopp explore, respectively, postwall German terrain in Oskar Roehler’s No Place to Go (2000) and the German-Polish borderland in This Very Moment (2003), Barbara Mennel discusses new media and globalization in a lesser known project by Ursula Biemann. Wilfred Wilms subjects Germany’s new spate of television miniseries, particularly Dresden (2006), dealing with German suffering, to a much needed critical scrutiny. What is more, the contributors build medium-specific arguments that place the films’ political, social, and historical concerns at the narrative level in dynamic relation to film form. Thus, Jennifer Kapczynski interrogates the use of faux Agfacolor in Wortmann’s retelling of Germany’s 1954 World Cup victory in Bern, and Marco Abel insists that the politics of Berlin School virtuoso Christian Petzold lie in his aesthetic strategies. More consistently than previous German film anthologies, this one makes a point of blending cultural, historical, aesthetic, and theoretical approaches and does so in accessible prose.

In recent years, edited volumes and special issues of journals have become the preferred destination of scholarly work on German film,4 and the field has begun to look towards thematically and historically organized collections of essays that will have a life in the undergraduate and graduate classroom, and will allow more variety in the contexts (language, level, and interdisciplinarity) in which German cinema is taught. The Collapse of the Conventional with its structuring principle of locating the contemporary politics of German cinema in relation to its earlier (mostly New German) iterations, suggests a first foray into an approach that is conversant with contemporary film and media scholarship. A next step might be to ask whether the newest German cinema can withstand other comparative contexts—that of its Eastern aesthetic heritage, that of world cinema, that of the art world, and that of new media formats. In 1995, Anton Kaes outlined a vision of the study of film within German departments which would “not take cultural production as self-evident, but [investigate] the conditions and functions of a film’s manifest appearance in a certain place at a certain
time.”4 Fisher and Prager’s volume is a significant undertaking in this vein—one that, hopefully, will inspire further explorations of this emerging and diverse body of cinematic work.

2. Ibid., 275.

Indiana University-Bloomington

ABANDONED IMAGES: FILM AND FILM’S END
By Stephen Barber.

Reviewed by Kelsey Haas

Stephen Barber’s new book, Abandoned Images: Film and Film’s End, examines the abandonment of film (celluloid) in the context of the proliferation of digital cinema technologies and considers the implications of this historically. Barber contributes to the ongoing debates about the end of film by reading the shift away from celluloid technologies through the architecture of the defunct movie palaces in downtown Los Angeles. Abandoned Images focuses on “the Broadway avenue of twelve ruined cinemas, once grandiose and excessive, now derelict but intact, in downtown Los Angeles, which offer their extraordinary facades and interiors as screens for the exploration of film’s end.” He also theorizes about the state of cinema and spectatorial experience throughout cinema history. The scope of Abandoned Images is wide-ranging, as Barber elegantly structures his book to not only read the architecture of the abandoned Los Angeles theatres in depth but also perform brief textual analyses of film sequences from mainstream, art and experimental cinema in order to apply his insights to global viewing culture. Abandoned Images will appeal to readers interested in cinematic space and the relationships between film and digital media.

The book is divided into four parts, each addressing Barber’s central topic using a slightly different methodology. In the first part, entitled “Film and the