Cinema and the Swastika
Also by Roel Vande Winkel

NAZI NEWSREEL PROPAGANDA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Also by David Welch

NAZI PROPAGANDA: The Powers and the Limitations
PROPAGANDA AND THE GERMAN CINEMA 1933–45
THE THIRD REICH: Politics and Propaganda
HITLER: Profile of a Dictator
Cinema and the Swastika

The International Expansion of Third Reich Cinema

Edited by

Roel Vande Winkel

and

David Welch
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Jacket picture designed by Stephan Demeulenaere, based on this Belgian poster from the Ufa film *Münchhausen* (1943). *Source:* Warie Collection.
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Introduction
Roel Vande Winkel and David Welch

Most film scholars and enthusiasts will agree that, from an aesthetic viewpoint, German films produced between 1933–45 are rather uninteresting. In contrast, a number of films produced during the Weimar Republic (1919–33) are considered milestones in the history of film art: silent films such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, 1920), Nosferatu (1922), The Last Laugh (Der letzte Mann, 1924), The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse, 1925) and Metropolis (1927); and also early sound films such as The Blue Angel (Der Blaue Engel, 1930) and M – The Murderers are Among Us (M. Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder, 1931). Under Nazi rule, the German film industry failed to produce a single film that is considered a major contribution to the development of the seventh art. The only possible exceptions to this may be found in Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens, 1935) and Olympia (1938), propagandistic documentaries that, from a technical viewpoint, were revolutionary. It is, in retrospect, ironic that these films were commissioned by the Nazi Party and sponsored by Adolf Hitler but produced outside the constraints imposed by Joseph Goebbels’ Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP). What is unquestionable is that few of the films Goebbels and his collaborators monitored from the first drafts of the screenplay to the censorship of the final cut will be remembered for outstanding artistic qualities. Remarkably, this does not stop such films, or at least a significant sample of them, from being studied in detail by many film researchers and students.

In spite of their rather limited aesthetic quality, films produced in the Third Reich and German films produced during the Second World War, in particular, have received massive attention from film scholars and continue to do so. Early studies such as Erwin Leiser’s Deutschland Erwache! (1968), Gerd Albrecht’s Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik (1969) and David Stewart Hull’s Film in the Third Reich (1969, the first English-language book on the subject) are now criticised for their flaws – which they certainly had – but were important steps in the coming of age of an area of research that is now often referred to as the ‘traditional’ school of Nazi film historiography. This school, the best known works of which are by Richard Taylor and David Welch, investigate the Nazi use of film for propaganda purposes – or more specifically, examine Nazi film propaganda as a reflection
of National-Socialist ideology. They therefore tend to focus on a rather limited corpus of films. It is no coincidence that these largely are the same films that the Nazi regime considered ‘politically especially valuable’ (staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll) and labelled as such – which for cinema owners made the films more financially attractive to screen. It is precisely the propagandistic potential the Nazi regime attached to such films that makes them such an interesting artefact. The consequence of this scholarly focus on a selected film corpus, a practice based on a rather strict dichotomy between films that are either ‘propagandistic’ or ‘non-political’, is that a large majority of films produced in the Third Reich received little to no attention. Films starring popular actors and actresses like Heinz Rühmann and Marika Rökk, who mainly played in ‘non-political’ entertainment features, are barely mentioned in many ‘traditional’ studies of Third Reich cinema. The same went for the films of the leading actress Zarah Leander. While the propagandistic intentions of a film such as The Great Love (Die grosse Liebe, 1942) have been recognised, her films are not as immediately associated with overt political ‘propaganda’ as those of Veit Harlan and his wife, the actress Kristina Söderbaum.

In the 1990s, what is now commonly accepted as a new school of Nazi film studies emerged. The ideas elaborated by scholars such as Stephen Lowry and Karsten Witte were important steps in the development of revisionist theories, the academic breakthrough of which is marked by the 1996 publications of literary scholars Eric Rentschler and Linda Schulte-Sasse. What these authors and their followers have in common – in spite of the sometimes very different theoretical frameworks they use – is a determination to look beyond the ‘traditional’ canon and to approach these films as complex cultural texts that, apart from their ‘preferred reading’ (intended messages and dominant themes, as reflected in screenplays and archival sources), contain unintended discursive elements that can be read in a variety of non-simultaneous or contradictory ways, which are also relevant to our understanding of the culture and society that produced and received them. The work of this new school has advanced the scholarly tools of (Nazi) cinema studies, and their readings of formerly neglected entertainment films have simultaneously improved and differentiated our understandings of film production and consumerism in the Third Reich. There are, however, two sides to every question and it must be clear that, while it has become fashionable for some exponents of the new generation to dispense with more traditional, historical examinations of Nazi cinema, several followers of the new school could benefit from some historical awareness before making their assertions. In the future, researchers will hopefully cross the history/cultural divide that has separated these schools: both the ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ studies of Nazi cinema can benefit from incorporating the insights of the other.

Whether they are part of the ‘traditional’ or the ‘new’ school, most of the internationally established scholarly works on the cinema of the Third
Reich have one thing in common. It is their strict focus on the production, distribution, screening or reception of films in the so-called ‘Old Empire’ (Altreich): the territories that were already part of the Third Reich in 1933–37. Some studies also pay attention to regions that were annexed afterwards but often focus only on territories that became important production centres like Austria. With the exception of Boguslaw Drewniak\(^{15}\) and Jürgen Spiker,\(^{16}\) virtually no author pays sufficient attention to the expansionist policy the German film industry pursued before and during the Second World War, attempting to turn Berlin into Europe’s very own Hollywood. Students of this era are of course aware that, apart from ‘reorganising’ the cinema of Nazi-occupied countries, the German film industry also tried to increase its influence over friendly or neutral states, like Italy, Spain or Sweden. It is also understood that this process, driven by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, not only represented an economic takeover, but also had important cultural and political implications. What has been lacking, however, is concrete information on the success or failure of the Third Reich film industry to influence, infiltrate or take over the film sector of such countries. This is surprising. As demonstrated in a recent publication, the export of German films and even the international career of an often-studied film such as *Uncle Krüger* (*Ohm Krüger*, 1941) may help us reassess the (propaganda) value traditionally ascribed to it.\(^{17}\) Another example of the relevance of international research into the distribution and reception of Third Reich cinema can be found in the mutilation of a French poster for *The Fantastic Adventures of Baron Münchhausen* (1943). The fact that someone in German-occupied France took the trouble – and the risk – of drawing swastikas on that poster and of inscribing it with ‘Kraut film, don’t go!’, testifies to the popularity of such film in occupied territory, but also to some people’s dissatisfaction with that popularity. (The poster is reprinted in Chapter 9 and also inspired the cover of this book.) It shows that some foreign cinema-goers considered German films to be harmless entertainment, whereas others saw them as political products, whose consumption was an act of collaboration.

So why have Third Reich film studies neglected them for so long? The main reason for this blind spot is a linguistic one. In many countries, scholars have already conducted ground-breaking research on the German influence over their national film industries (1933–45). Unfortunately, access to most of these publications is restricted to scholars who read the local language. *Cinema and the Swastika* aims to bring together research in this field. This book investigates various attempts to infiltrate – economically, politically and culturally – the film industries of 20 countries or regions Nazi Germany occupied, befriended or entertained ‘neutral’ relationships with. The chapters have been placed in alphabetical order and cover the following countries or regions: Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, South-east Europe, Spain,
Introduction

Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The last chapter also covers regions that the USSR occupied before the German invasion of June 1941: parts of Belorussia, part of eastern Poland and the former Baltic States Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Many of the specialists who contributed chapters to this book have already published extensively on the topic in their mother tongue, but now do so for the first time in English. To place the ‘local’ studies in a broader framework, the book opens with an assessment of the German film industry (1933–45), of the International Film Chamber through which Germany tried to take the lead of the ‘Film Europe’ movement, and of Hispano Film, through which German cinema tried to conquer Spanish markets.

For a book with a scope as wide as this, it is unavoidable to have some blind spots. It would, for instance, have been interesting to learn more about German film activities in the neutral state of Portugal, or in occupied Denmark. Also, the current state of research in or about most countries that after 1945 became part of the Soviet sphere of influence does not yet allow for detailed analyses of German film activities in those regions. However, we are happy to present in this paperback version a new chapter (on German Film Politics in the Occupied Eastern Territories) that will certainly be of considerable interest and partially redresses some of the shortcomings that we have identified. It is of course our sincere hope that this book, for which the first hardback version received the Willy Haas Award at Cinegraph’s Cinefest in November 2007, will prompt more research into the areas that still need to be addressed.

Most chapters of this book have a political–economical approach and pay more attention to the superstructures (the activities of big companies such as Ufa, the diplomatic and economic manoeuvres made by German officials and businessmen, the larger historical and political context against which such processes are to be understood) than to the experiences of local film-goers. On the other hand, this does not mean that the tastes and preferences of local audiences have been ignored. One of the recurring themes of this book is the international popularity of films and actors/actresses that were so often neglected in early studies of Third Reich cinema. Another recurring theme that one discovers in most of the chapters is the dual film policy that Joseph Goebbels, as Propaganda Minister, attempted to implement. On the one hand, German films were in their totality considered as important economic commodities and cultural products. They had to attract audiences in occupied territories, where (Anglo-)American competition had been wiped out, but they were also supposed to be or to become popular in neutral countries, where Hollywood films never disappeared. On the other hand, films were in general supposed to be in line with the National-Socialist ideology (Weltanschauung). Moreover, a selected number of German films were conceived and deployed as propaganda weapons, and were supposed to
influence the ‘hearts and minds’ of as many people as possible, at home and abroad. Combining both policies, which sometimes served contradictory goals, was not easy and sometimes impossible. Implementing these policies demanded flexibility and an attitude of ‘give and take’, especially because local authorities (who sometimes envisaged a film policy of their own) and local audiences (with their specific film taste or viewing practices) all had their own objections or requests. All of this resulted, as the German film historian Martin Loiperdinger pointed out in a review of the original hardback of this book, in the remarkable fact that ‘from a film-political viewpoint, each country was a special case’.18 Precisely because of this, we chose to indicate defining characteristics in this introduction and to establish a general overview in Chapter 1, but decided against writing a concluding chapter. In our view, writing such a chapter would be superfluous, since to generalise the unique story of each of the 20 chapters would be an injustice to the ground-breaking research of our contributors.

Editing this book has been a slow but rewarding process. We are indebted to our contributors and hope that their and our efforts will encourage further comparative research on the influence Nazi Germany had on the international film industry.

Notes

5. This is above all true for Hull. See, for instance, J. Petley, Capital and Culture. German Cinema 1933–1945 (London: British Film Institute, 1979), pp. 1–8.
8. Of course, in a highly politicised society such as the Third Reich, even the apolitical becomes significant in that so-called ‘entertainment films’ tend to promote the official ‘world view’ of things and reinforce the existing political, social and economic order. See, Welch (rev. 2001), pp. 35–8.
13. Nevertheless, films such as *Jew Süss* and *Hitler Youth Quex* (*Hitlerjunge Quex*, 1933) remain a very popular object of research even among this ‘new’ school.