Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Representing and Confronting the Nazi Past in Postwar German Film, 1946 -1961

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Background

When Germany surrendered in May 1945, cultural life found itself at a standstill. In the West, the Allies took immediate control of the film industry, and began the reeducation and denazification of German citizens, including film professionals. Documentary style films like The Death Mills imported American films were central to this process of projecting democratic values on the German population. In the East, the Soviets and German film personalities almost immediately reestablished the film industry in May 1946, when filmmaker Wolfgang Staudte sought a license from the Soviet occupying forces to produce the film The Man Who I am Going to Kill, which would become the first postwar film The Murderers are Among Us. Staudte simultaneously founded the film studio, DEFA, which would remain the state-owned studio of East Germany.

Films produced between 1945 and 1961 characteristically captured the Nazi past, wartime, and postwar society in creative and compelling ways that began a process of “cultural renewal” in Germany (Hake, 2002). Central to this renewal was “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” or coming to terms with the past. As you will discover in the following sections, the early films of postwar German attempt to confront, or at least address, guilt and responsibility of the Nazi past, and its implications in national rebuilding Wiederaufbau in postwar society.

Representing Psychological Trauma

A key way that postwar German films attempted to portray and comprehend the experiences of the immediate past was through cinematic representations of psychological trauma. Films of both the east and the west dealt with questions of guilt, responsibility, and trauma not through an interpretation of politics, but through a process of “forgiving and forgetting” the past (von Keltz, 2007). These films manifested trauma through male war returnees, who remained haunted by their wartime experiences.

• The Murderers Are Among Us, Hans Mertens returns from war to destroyed Berlin. Hans’ contempt for life is manifest in the dark shadowing of his face, mellow tone, and frequent ritual of drinks and women. In a hospital bed, Hans cries “Captain I can’t do that!” as a double exposure shows Hans at war and him sanitizing through a rubble-lined street. With the backdrop of Berlin’s ruins, the devastated buildings mirrors Hans’ inner despair.

• In Somewhere in Berlin (1947), life for workers in Berlin is at a total standstill. Herr Steidel suffers from shell-shock, and believes the war is still happening: Waking up from a nightmare, a uniformed Steidel puts his helmet on his head, marches to the balcony, and performs the military salute.

• In Love 47 (1949), war.returnee Beckmann feels personally responsible and guilty for his military participation, which is manifest in disturbing dreams: an abstract, dramatic scene shows a skeleton in German uniform playing a xylophone made of bones, as a double exposure depicts a montage of graves, soldiers, and Beckmann shouting “Do you all want to live?”

Ordinary Germans and Accountability

German cinema also served to confront the guilt and accountability of ordinary Germans for the Nazi past. In contrast to the west, who imposed their own reeducation films, the Soviets enabled the Germans to confront their own guilt through making their own productions. A key charge that emerges in these East German films is the political unconsciousness and indifference of all sectors of society, not just the Nazi elite.

• In one of the first Jewish narratives, Marriage in the Shadows (1947) criticized the indifference of middle class art circles to Nazi politics and violence in the 30s and 40s. Actor Hans Wieland’s distaste for Nazi politics leads to his blindness to and dismissal of Nazi racial policies, which forces his Jewish wife and actress into “the shadows” while his acting career thrives. Despite their personal rebuff of Nazism, their blindness makes them “just as guilty” as the Nazi elite.

• In Rotation (1949), working class printing press worker Hans Behnke’s accountability comes into question due to his involvement in the printing of the Völkischer Beobachter, the main Nazi newspaper. Indifferent to Nazi politics, Behnke watches idly on as his Jewish neighbors are deported, with an “I can’t change anything” attitude.

• A German soldier stationed in Bulgaria believes that Auschwitz, a death camp, is a vegetable garden until conversations with a Jewish woman reveal otherwise in Stars (1959). The audience is meant to empathize with the protagonist who despises politics and war, but this forces him into a unconsciousness that prevents him from taking meaningful action or resistance.

Gendered Experiences of War and Postwar Society

German films attempted to confront feelings of guilt and responsibility through a gendered lens, which had the dual purpose of both addressing individual guilt and defining postwar gender roles.

• In the immediate postwar period, confronting guilt was reserved for male characters, especially those returning from war. Men failed to participate in rebuilding Wiederaufbau due to their inability to come to terms with the past.

• Women’s experiences in postwar society were frequently decentralized, and they are focused on the present rather than dwelling on the past. In contrast to Hans Mertens in The Murderers Susanna Wallner focuses on rebuilding her life within her four walls rather than dwelling on her traumatic experience in the camps.

• Men during wartime are criticized for being politically unconscious or indifferent, whereas women are portrayed as victims of men’s actions and struggle to have their voice and reasoning heard.

Conclusions

Studying German postwar cinema is useful in understanding the ways that Germans attempted to understand and confront their own past. The way this was manifested revealed distinct gender discrepancies in the way German society saw gender roles as they related to guilt and responsibility in the war and postwar period. The Soviet sector interestingly gave German filmmakers a greater license to address these questions, although with political influences. Importantly, these films asked the very questions that would reappear in scholarly and public debate in the 1990s.

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“I did not want the war, I have not done anything wrong, and I can’t change anything”

-Hans Behnke in Rotation (1949)