

Book Review

Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity. By Ofer Ashkenazi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012. xvi + 234 pp. £55.00 (hardback).

Beginning with the intriguing tale of Alexander Bessel, the eponymous hero of Jewish filmmaker Richard Oswald's 1927 film *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel*, Ofer Ashkenazi's *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity* sets out to explore what he describes as 'one of the most prevailing, yet neglected, phenomena in the German film of the pre-Nazi era', namely, the idea that Weimar 'genre film' offers an opportunity for discovering the 'intricacies of early twentieth-century German-Jewish identity' and identity formation, including issues of performativity, authenticity and otherness (p. xiv–xv). Ashkenazi's underlying question concerns how the 'aspirations, fears, and self-perception' of Jews in modern Germany helped to shape Weimar genre films.

Contributing a new perspective on Weimar film is no small feat, considering the formidable array of books on the subject, from classic works by Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer to more recent studies by Thomas Elsaesser and Anton Kaes. Ashkenazi's book, however, is extremely readable and engaging, and offers analyses of Weimar films often neglected. This, along with his unique focus on the link between processes of Jewish identity formation and cinema, allows Ashkenazi to contribute a fresh perspective to Weimar film scholarship.

Chapter 1 locates the book's thesis concerning Weimar German-Jewish identity and Jewish efforts to assimilate into middle-class society within the context of the burgeoning film industry of the 1920s. Ashkenazi distinguishes his approach from other scholars who focus on theatre as the principal sphere for Jewish identity formation by arguing that it was cinema that was the 'major site for the contemplation and exhibition of Jewish experience'—above all the 'challenge of assimilation' and its limits—during the Weimar years (p. 3). Chapter 1 traces the substantial presence of Jews in Berlin's film culture and outlines the book's main argument: that film was an 'effective tool for the contemplation of Jewish assimilation' and identity formation within the modern urban sphere (p. 11). Weimar films demonstrate, in short, how Jewish filmmakers promoted the formation of a 'liberal, multicultural, transnational bourgeois society' (p. 15).

With Chapter 2 Ashkenazi begins his analysis of Weimar genre films, beginning with urban comedies. The key theme of this chapter is the Jewish-coded attempt of individuals who are outsiders to integrate into the desired social milieu through imitation and mimicry. The individual who is coded-as-Jew appears as an actor or performer—gifted in the art of pretence and masquerade. Ashkenazi argues that three early comedies of Ernst Lubitsch (*I Don't Want to be a Man*, 1918; *The Oyster Princess*, 1919; and *Meyer from Berlin*, 1920) first appear to indulge in antisemitic tropes and stereotypes of the scheming and ultimately doomed-to-fail Jew who tries to assimilate by means of disguise into societies that are closed off to him by virtue of his birth and so-called 'nature'. As Ashkenazi shows, however, these films end up exposing as false the very tropes that they initially appear to engage in—including the ostensibly clear boundaries between 'us' and 'them', between *parvenu* and aristocrat, and between insider and outsider. When all artifice and trickery have been exposed, however, something more insinuating remains that bridges otherwise irreconcilable differences—what Ashkenazi calls a new authenticity underlying a 'new bourgeois identity' (p. 32), which espouses a liberal vision and transcends stale social prejudices and barriers.

The second part of Chapter 2 focuses on two films by Reinhold Schünzel. The protagonists in these films are not clearly coded as Jewish but either exhibit stereotypically Jewish characteristics or demonstrate a kind of wishful thinking that resonates with 'liberal Jewish identity discourse' (p. 37). This section is strongest in its discussion of the efforts of the two protagonists to maintain separate

spheres of private and public life—an effort that Ashkenazi nicely links to the insidious threat of Weimar Germany's new mass urban culture. This point, along with his demonstration of how the stereotypical Jew doubles as a symbol of modern urban society—an 'urban (anti-hero)'—will prove to be central throughout the book.

Chapter 3 turns to the Weimar domestic melodrama and focuses on films written or directed by Jews. Thematically, the chapter examines two aspects of Jewish identity discourse—hybrid identity and the concept of the 'stranger' as a necessary mediator within modern urban society. Ashkenazi poses the question of how domestic melodramas relate to the perspective of the bourgeois Jew in Germany after World War One; in the case of Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923), for example, the protagonist's failed attempt to become a 'man of the street' is interpreted through the trope of the 'stranger' (p. 56). Particularly interesting is a discussion of the private sphere in the films in question, including not only *The Street* but *Jealousy* and *Nju*. This private sphere—the bourgeois apartment—plays a key role in Jewish acculturation by enabling Jews to preserve their Jewish identity at home and thus maintain a hybrid identity. As Ashkenazi is careful to point out, however, the protagonists' efforts to 'reconcile different aspects of modern experience' were not exclusively or even essentially 'Jewish' (p. 63). The films thus locate key issues underlying Jewish acculturation—including questions of authenticity, performativity and otherness—within the greater urban culture of Weimar Berlin.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine, respectively, the genres of horror film and exotic adventure and war films, drawing on the framework and tropes laid out in earlier chapters. Chapter 4 analyses two adaptations of Hanns Heinz Ewers' novel *Alraune: A Story of a Living Creature* (1911). Henrik Galeen's film (1927) transforms Ewers' Lilith-like Alraune into a metaphor for 'hybrid identity and social integration' (p. 88), while Richard Oswald's adaptation (1930) manifests a 'liberal Jewish anxiety during a time of economic, social, and political turmoil' (p. 109)—a response, Ashkenazi suggests, to an increase in antisemitism since Galeen's earlier adaptation. Chapter 5 focuses on journeys beyond national borders, the figure of the 'stranger', themes of border-crossing within the context of dangerous conflicts, and the search for a 'transnational bourgeois community' that transcends national or ethnic belonging (p. 111). Films discussed include Joe May's *Mistress of the World* (1919/1920) as well as *The Transformation of Dr. Bessel*, which, Ashkenazi persuasively claims, makes 'a cogent case for Jewish assimilation as a stage in the creation of a new bourgeois society, transnational in essence' and based on shared middle-class values (p. 141).

The Jewish filmmakers discussed viewed the possibility of integration into middle-class society from the outside. As outsiders and 'others' (or 'strangers'), they were looking for a way *in*—not only into society but into German public discourse as well (p. 152). For these individuals, the medium of film offered a unique opportunity to encode the stereotypical Jewish position in such a way so as to make it resonate with the "'typical" bourgeois urbanite' (p. 150). Many of the experiences of the films' protagonists, furthermore, draw on tropes common to Jewish discourse on assimilation and reveal hopes for a more progressive and liberal society. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including archival and contemporary print material, and carefully contextualizing the films within their social and historical backgrounds, this book displays a graceful balance of erudition and accessibility that makes it a welcome addition to scholarship on Weimar cinema.