Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity by Ofer Ashkenazi (review)

Valerie Weinstein

German Studies Review, Volume 37, Number 1, February 2014, pp. 219-221 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/gsr.2014.0046

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Essen’s robust, export-oriented *Mittelstand*. During the 1990s and early 2000s the National-Bank avoided excessive investment in the toxic American assets that later got many of Germany’s other regional banks into trouble. In fact, by being transparent with its equity holders about its troubled assets, the bank’s directors sustained a positive image through the financial crisis of 2008 and thereby maintained the bank’s relatively high rate of profit.

Overall, Scholtysceck has provided a compelling narrative that will appeal to business, economic, and political historians. Yet in trying to reach these three groups of scholars, his work leaves some stones unturned. For business historians, Scholtysceck’s narrative at times deviates into overly detailed discussions of the political context and avoids potentially useful comparisons with other banks in terms of assets, profits, or equity. A table on the National-Bank’s earnings and asset structure after World War II would have provided a useful point of reference. For economic historians, Scholtysceck’s detailed discussion of the 1930s and 1970s overlooks some important interpretations and often overemphasizes the 1973 oil crisis as the turning point in postwar German development. How, for example, did the National-Bank navigate the gradual end of “extensive” growth in the 1970s and the rise of new information and capital-intensive sectors? While Scholtysceck clearly presents the legal issues facing the National-Bank during the de-Nazification of the late 1940s, political historians might have been interested to learn more about how the directors grappled with the memory of National Socialism. How, for instance, did the bank management represent the activities of their institution under the Third Reich to the German public in the immediate postwar period?

Scholtsceck’s book is nevertheless an excellent addition to the literature on German corporate history in the twentieth century. More than a case study, it offers readers a wide-ranging portrait of a single financial institution from a regional and national perspective.

Stephen G. Gross, New York University


Ofer Ashkenazi’s *Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity* makes valuable contributions to German studies, Jewish studies, and film history. Unearthing and exploring pervasive engagement with Jewish assimilation and acculturation and liberal, bourgeois ideals in Weimar cinema, this clear, engaging, and well-researched analysis offers an original perspective on Weimar films and their Jewish filmmakers.

Ashkenazi shows the importance of understanding Weimar cinema as more than a “German” national cinema and more than solely reflective of a “German” national
psyche in the tradition of Siegfried Kracauer (From Caligari to Hitler, Princeton, 1947; 2004). Beginning with the evidence that many directors and other film industry members in Weimar Germany were Jewish and first- or second-generation immigrants, Ashkenazi shows how Weimar cinema also reflects Jewish experiences of modernity and early twentieth-century debates about Jewish acculturation and assimilation. Ashkenazi contends that the modern Jewish experience—or at least the one of Weimar filmmakers—was an urban, bourgeois one deeply invested in cosmopolitan liberalism. According to Ashkenazi, the experiences, desires, and fears of such urban, liberal Jews find expression in the thematic preoccupations in Weimar film with strangers and outsiders, with the possibility of finding authentic identity through performance, and with negotiations of identity between public and private space. He illustrates such preoccupations through well-contextualized, careful close readings of both well- and lesser-known examples of Weimar genre film, including urban comedies, domestic melodramas, horror films, and exotic adventure and war films.

This book makes an important and original contribution to Weimar film studies. There is much fine scholarship on Weimar film, including significant work that locates Weimar cinema in a variety of social, cultural, and political contexts, including analyses of Jewishness, Jewish assimilation, and antisemitism in films of the period. What distinguishes Ashkenazi’s book is his reversal of the assumption that Weimar cinema is a “German” cinema. By revisiting Weimar films as “Jewish” cinema, Ashkenazi develops a narrative that explains some of the era’s thematic fascinations. Ashkenazi does not stick to films with overtly Jewish characters and explicitly Jewish content. Instead, he primarily interprets films that on the surface more obviously address class, gender, and other German national concerns. The relationship of such films to the Jewish experience, according to Ashkenazi, lies not only in the biographies of their directors but also in the film texts themselves. Engagement with Jewishness manifests itself in themes that echo contemporary discussions of Jewish assimilation and acculturation and in a strategy of “double encoding,” of deploying characters and narratives that embed Jewish concerns within more generally legible ones and that appeal simultaneously, and perhaps differently, to Jewish spectators and to a broader bourgeois audience. Thus, a suite of seemingly unrelated films previously understood by audiences and critics to have been about a variety of topics reveal themselves here to be, beneath the surface, all about Jews. To his credit, Ashkenazi does not present his analysis in a totalizing way, he “does not seek to supersede all these other readings. Rather, [he] points to an essential yet understudied cultural context of the production and reception of Weimar film” (150). Ashkenazi’s methodological intervention thus allows readers to see Weimar film from a new perspective and offers tools both for decoding traces of Jewishness in texts where they initially are not evident and for talking about the complexity and polyphony of Weimar film.

*Weimar Film and Modern Jewish Identity* is written in a clear and engaging way.
The author does a particularly good job of presenting a clear historical and conceptual framework in the introduction and repeating and refining his argument in each chapter, so that while each chapter sheds new light on new material, the overall trajectory of the argument and its implications remain clear throughout. Because of its effectively structured argument, this book could either be read cover to cover (and I recommend doing so) or by individual chapter, particularly by scholars interested only in a particular film or particular genre. It achieves a harmonious balance between cultural history, intellectual history, and close readings of individual films, and the connections Ashkenazi draws between the three disciplines and types of primary materials make both his close readings and his thesis more compelling.

This book speaks most directly to informed scholars of Weimar cinema, who know the films and scholarship well enough to see the significance of Ashkenazi’s intervention. Historians of Weimar culture, of German Jewry, and any other scholars thinking about Jewishness and film or about broader questions of assimilation, acculturation, and representation should consider Ashkenazi’s argument as well, whether or not Weimar film is their main research area. The accessibility of the style, the thorough research, interdisciplinary methods, and interesting subject matter mean this work should appeal strongly to scholars in Jewish studies, German studies, film studies, history, and beyond.

Valerie Weinstein, University of Cincinnati


Christopher Probst begins his examination of the Nazi-era reception of Martin Luther’s anti-Jewish writings with the story of Heinrich Fausel, a Protestant pastor from Württemberg whose statements in the 1930s supported many of Luther’s criticisms of the Jews. But in 1943, he was involved in Protestant efforts to hide and protect Jews. For Probst, the potentially contradictory nature of Fausel’s actions opens a window onto the broader complexities and ambiguities of Protestant attitudes toward the Jews during the Third Reich. In exploring these complexities Probst strives to avoid overly simplistic linkages between Luther’s anti-Jewish thought and Nazi racial antisemitism, while at the same time arguing forcefully for the existence of ideational affinities and continuities that stretched across the centuries. One of the central goals of Probst’s study is thus to elide, or at least problematize, the conceptual distinction between what scholars have typically viewed as the traditional Christian anti-Judaism of Luther’s era and the modern pseudoscientific racial antisemitism of the Nazis.

Probst’s theoretical framework is built largely on the work of Gavin Langmuir, the