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Book Review: Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager, eds., *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*

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*The Collapse of the Conventional* is a scholarly response to the popular and critical perception of a “return” in German cinema since 2000. After twenty years of movies intended more for national entertainment than international prestige, German films of the last ten years have received renewed attention and respect from audiences, critics, and scholars alike. Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager’s ambitious collection identifies re-engagement with 20th century German history and politics as the defining aspect of this new period and sets out to examine this engagement across a broad selection of films. Their introduction offers a brief outline of German film history, identifying a new “Third Wave,” following Weimar and the New German Cinema of the 1960s, ’70s, and early ’80s. The collection should, they state, consider contemporary political films in relation to the New German Cinema movement of the 1960s to the 1980s, from which the volume takes its name. Keeping that earlier period in mind, the editors “intend for the category of politics … to serve as an optic” for understanding the landscape of contemporary German cinema. It has become nearly impossible to speak uncritically of “national” cinemas in film studies, and Fisher and Prager approach the topic with due caution. Taking a cue from Randall Halle’s excellent *German Film After Germany*, they adopt a discursive approach to the “nation” in the collection, which includes studies on several transnational productions and works from German-speaking nations outside Germany that nonetheless engage with specifically German historical and political discourses. Working from this critical concept of the nation, *The Collapse of the Conventional* is loosely organized around three main themes: films that revisit World War II, cinema that investigates East and West German identity post-unification, and films that “engage the present moment and its most contemporary trends.” The lack of formal division between sections allows for enlightening thematic interplay across the collected essays, enabling several threads to appear and reappear throughout the book, regardless of the period under scrutiny.

The first of these threads, and a major hot-button issue in Germany today, is the...
representation of German victimhood. This debate usually centers on World War II films, as it did prominently with the release of 2004’s *Downfall*. Elizabeth Krimmer’s contribution addresses this issue through a side-by-side examination of *Downfall* and another blockbuster, 1993’s *Stalingrad*. Critically investigating both films’ uses of melodrama to mythologize World War II soldiers and NSDAP leaders, Krimmer asserts that “the focus on Germans as victims of Hitler and the war serves to elide questions of responsibility and guilt.” Wilfried Wilms and Anna Parkinson offer similar criticisms of the TV miniseries *Dresden* (2006) and *Rosenstrasse* (2003), respectively. In their essays, Krimmer, Wilms, and Parkinson all identify uses of melodrama to disguise real political relations in World War II-era Germany. This concern about portraying perpetrators as victims or eliding different kinds of victimization resurfaces in Jaimey Fisher’s genre-based examination of the 2006 Oscar-winner *The Lives of Others*, whose heroization of a Stasi officer raised eyebrows in Germany for its historical inaccuracies. Fisher makes the controversial but, in this case, convincing argument that melodrama generically works at cross purposes with politically critical filmmaking, raising the question of whether the portrayal of German victimhood is a result of production trends rather than a more sinister and “deliberate political negotiation of a long-time political and moral quandary” that Wilms sees.8

It is not just narrative structure that plays into the debates around victimhood. Both Lutz Koepnick and Jennifer Kapczynski examine the politics of aesthetics in depictions of German patriotism in films by Sönke Wortmann. Koepnick looks at Wortmann’s documentary about the 2006 World Cup, which took place in Germany and saw a resurgence of patriotism in a country (rightly) skeptical of nationalism. He notes Wortmann’s desire “to picture soccer as a site where powerful passions reroute the course of national history and shape new forms of collective identification.”9 Koepnick makes an insightful connection between Wortmann’s use of new technologies—“postcinematic forms of digital filmmaking”—and the changing nature of “postnationalist German patriotism.”10 But Kapczynski’s essay on Wortmann’s earlier narrative film, *The Miracle of Bern* (2003), about West Germany’s victory in the 1954 World Cup, is the true highlight of the chapters on German national identity and victimhood. Kapczynski’s piece is not only an addition to German film studies but an exemplary contribution and call for more work in “color semiotics.”11 She examines the implications of Wortmann’s imitation of Agfacolor, Germany’s early competition for Technicolor, which came to characterize early Nazi propaganda. Her innovative and incisive exploration of the industrial and aesthetic qualities of this particular process opens up questions about the political implications of nostalgia and the romanticization of a moment (1954) when German nationalism was still thoroughly haunted by the memory of Nazi horrors.

Kapczynski’s is the first in the volume, although certainly not the last, to spotlight the political implications of aesthetic decisions. In fact, this focus on the importance of aesthetics is another thread that connects essays across thematic groups. In chapters on Berlin School luminaries Christian Petzold and Christoph Hochhäusler, respectively, Marco Abel and Kristin Kopp expound upon the filmmakers’ deployment of alternative aesthetics and narrative techniques to promote engaged viewership, itself a political act. The implication, of course, is that high-budget, Hollywood-style productions, which have become increasingly common in German cinema since the 1980s, are a sign of conservative support for the status quo. By contrast, Roger Cook’s striking—if contrarian—piece on Hans Weingartner’s *The Edukators* (2004) insists that the director “appropriates the cinematic strategies of Hollywood and turns them back against the capitalist system that invented them” in this story of contemporary young political activists.12 Unlike the auteurs and activists of the 1970s, today’s filmmakers and activists flexibly deploy “all discursive weapons, even those most effective in the service of global capitalism.”13 Cook celebrates the departure from the “leaden” aesthetics of 1970s political filmmaking.14

In contrast, Johannnes von Moltke contends that, as *auteur* cinema, Oskar Roehler’s 2000 film *No Place to Go* is an act of resistance to the
“mainstream of German cinema,” which “strives to ‘Europeanize’ or continues to emulate Hollywood models.”¹⁵ The aesthetic-political debates running through this volume recall cinematic discourse in the 1970s and 1980s, when filmmakers like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Werner Herzog used cinematic form politically. The question of whether Hollywood-style gloss can make a subversive statement in the contemporary moment of German cinema still circulates.

Regardless of their position in the aesthetics debate, several scholars in this volume agree that, in a newly “normalized” Germany, films about the past have become a way to “neatly sidestep the difficulties of the present,” a way of “deflecting criticism away from current potential sore spots without being labeled escapist.”¹⁶ Perhaps the collection’s most promising area of scholarship is this third thread: a focus on how some contemporary filmmakers are working through issues of globalization. Barbara Mennel makes a convincing case that some of New German Cinema’s true heirs are in the art world, specifically in Biemann’s video piece Remote Sensing (2001), which investigates international sex trafficking in a way that recalls radical feminist filmmaking of the 1970s. Brad Prager’s essay on utopias underlines the “totality” of the neoliberal ideological system and how, under changing concepts of space and time, “utopias are less about the divisions between East and West than they are about finding intimate and often romantic avenues of escape.”¹⁷ For the most part—again, Cook is an exception—these scholars find dissections of globalization and contemporary geopolitics in those works that also adhere to the more subversive aesthetic practices found in New German Cinema.¹⁸ As they did in the West Germany of the 1970s, debates center on whether a film’s Leftist politics loses its importance if the filmmaker sacrifices audience appeal to the purity of the message. What has changed seems to be that now World War II is fodder for apolitical mainstream cinema, whereas engaging that dark past was a subversive political act for Fassbinder, Wenders, and Herzog.

For all its strengths, The Collapse of the Conventional runs into two central pitfalls. The first is historiographic in nature: by referring to the New German Cinema—a West German film movement—as their lens to examine contemporary cinema, the editors and their authors fall into the common trap of excluding East Germany from German cinema history. Only Michael D. Richardson makes a substantial reference to an East German film from the 1970s, and the editors make no mention or apology for their omission of East German film history. While this exclusion occurs frequently in German film studies, it is still impossible to compile a comprehensive history of German cinema while leaving out East Germany.

The other glaring omission in the book is insufficient discussion of films that engage with issues of immigration and Germany’s (and Europe’s) changing ethnic makeup. With some of the country’s most prominent young filmmakers—Fatih Akin and Thomas Arslan, for example—telling stories that touch explicitly or obliquely on questions of immigration, the under-representation of essays on these films is both striking and troubling.¹⁹ This is particularly noticeable due to the volume’s attempts to focus on globalization and its effects. Germany’s problematic position as a leader among “First World” nations points to issues of immigration, citizenship processes, and labor practices, but these discussions are absent from The Collapse of the Conventional.

These absences aside, this is a carefully compiled, well-informed collection that convincingly introduces a new period of cinema into German film history. While the essays do not find a reemergence of New German Cinema’s “critical and demystifying engagement with the past, especially with Nazism and World War II”—indeed, quite the opposite—the focus on New German Cinema enables enlightening insights into just what has changed in contemporary political discourse.²⁰ The collected essays employ an impressive range of approaches to a broad, yet coherent, selection of contemporary German films, from theoretical to historically contextual. A mix of aesthetic- and narrative-based perspectives provides an illuminating, if not comprehensive, view of the landscape of German cinema today, which has indeed made an impressive return to the international stage, as Germany itself has increasingly become a leader among Western nations.
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End Notes

2 Ibid., 8.
3 The Oberhausen Manifesto, the foundational document of New German cinema, described the “collapse of the conventional German film” Ibid., 2.
4 Ibid., 13.
5 Randall Halle. German Film After Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
6 Ibid., 31.
10 Ibid., 67.
13 Ibid., 323.
14 Ibid., 324.
15 Johannes Von Moltke, “Terrains Vagues: Landscapes of Unification in Oskar Roehler’s No Place to Go,” Ibid., 164.
16 Marco Abel, “Imaging Germany: The (Political) Cinema of Christian Petzold,” Ibid., 259; Cook, 317. In writing of “normalization,” I take my cue from several authors in the volume who use the term to refer to the process of coming to terms with Germany’s extraordinary history in the 20th century. Normalization is related to the widely accepted theory in German studies that, historically speaking, Germany has had a Sonderweg, or unique path, in its relatively short national history.
18 Such subversive practices are exemplified by the work of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose relationship to melodrama included both an embrace and an aggressive departure from generic conventions.
19 Fisher and Prager do touch on Akin’s work in their introduction, and Prager’s essay takes up a film that centers on two young undocumented immigrants, but neither essay focuses on immigration itself as a political issue that filmmakers are engaging. Rather, they use the lenses of aesthetic similarity to Fassbinder and the trope of the utopia to examine the films, respectively.
20 For a thorough overview of how immigration has played into 20th century German history, see Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, and Anton Kaes, eds., Germany In Transit: Nation and Migration, 1954-2004 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
21 Fisher and Prager, 6. An exception to the otherwise general consensus that German political filmmaking skipped a generation is John E. Davidson’s chapter in this volume, “Playing Hide and Seek with Tradition: Games, Aesthetic Form, and Social Critique in German Cinema following the Wende.” Davidson persuasively highlights continuities from New German Cinema through to contemporary filmmaking that can be found in the oft-dismissed “cinema of consensus” era.