Book Reviews

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The Films of Konrad Wolf: Archive of the Revolution, Larson Powell (2020)

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The filmmaker Konrad Wolf (1925–82) was the son of the Jewish writer, émigré and communist, Friedrich Wolf. The father wrote a play, *Professor Mamlock* (1933), about conversion to the communist cause when he first went into exile from Nazi Germany. His son made the play into a film that premiered in May 1961, three months before the Berlin Wall went up, thereby helping to shore up the antifascist self-mythologization of the SED regime. Konrad Wolf emigrated aged 8 with his family to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), returning to the country of his birth in the uniform of the Red Army. In 1949, he returned to Moscow to attend film school, and went on to become one of the most prominent filmmakers of the GDR. Konrad's brother, Markus, had a parallel and equally successful career as an intelligence officer, rising through the ranks to become the head of the East German Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung (HVA), the foreign intelligence agency in 1957. Konrad Wolf himself held a prominent official position as head of the East German Academy of Arts. When the singer Wolf Biermann was expelled from the GDR in 1976, Konrad Wolf supported the state's decision (209). As Powell's archival research documents, the filmmaker was surprised and concerned when the last film he completed, *Solo Sunny* (1980), about a young singer trying in a haphazard and self-destructive way to leave her mark on the grey conformity of the GDR, struck a chord and set off a debate in the limited, party-supervised public sphere (210). To study Konrad Wolf's filmic oeuvre is thus to confront all the problems associated with the works of artists in the GDR who, as he did, remained committed to and idealized the, as it turned out, bullying, sometimes murderous, and in any case dysfunctional communist regime.

Powell's detailed and rich book follows two landmark essays on Wolf's films. Koch and Gaines (1993) critically analysed how the focus on the antifascist struggle in a number of Wolf's films elides both his own

Jewish identity, and the specifically anti-Semitic aspects of Nazi terror. In Koch's reading, this neglect comes back to haunt the films in images which break beyond 'the corset of political texts and doctrines' (1993: 75). Elsaesser and Wedel later argued that Wolf's films should be approached using 'a comparative or integrative historiography' (2001: 21), one which explores the connections to other filmmaking traditions: West Germany, Hollywood and the European New Waves of the 1960s and 1970s. Including Wolf in this 'integrative and international history of German cinema' (2001: 23) will, they propose, provide a richer understanding of the period between Nazism and the 1980s.

Powell's book, comprising detailed discussions of all of Wolf's films, follows Koch in critically interrogating Wolf's portrayal and/or neglect of the Holocaust, and Elsaesser and Wedel in placing the works in a wider cinematic context. In addition, he reads the films of Wolf as a depository of the hopes the GDR could never fulfil: 'I seek, within Wolf's work, a reflexive acknowledgment of the limits of the revolutionary project of socialism, a project that increasingly haunts us today (as an unworked-through 'archive')' (10). Powell uses the word 'archive' (11–17) to signal his analysis is influenced by Foucault, Derrida, Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst. But the term seems mainly to be a metaphor for the way works from the GDR contain habits of thinking and feeling that were suddenly interrupted when the Wall came down in 1989. Wolf's films contain unfinished business, and the premise of the book is that cultural critics in the twenty-first century can learn from this unfinished business.

Powell is determined to respect the aesthetic autonomy of film to avoid reducing cinema to sociological or historical facts beyond the movies themselves. As a result, he pays careful attention to details of film technique, as in the extended analysis of the musical score in the cinematic adaptation of Christa Wolf's novel *Der geteilte Himmel* ('The divided sky') (novel 1963, film 1964) (127–31). This raises the methodological problem of how details can be linked to a wider story. Gertrud Koch solved the problem by suggesting that Wolf's neglect of the Holocaust is disrupted by images which the filmmaker can't control. Powell's approach aims critically to situate details in their cultural context by drawing on a wide range of conceptual tools, including Axel Honneth's analyses of recognition (203), Judith Butler's reading of Antigone (212), and Bakhtin's idea of a 'chronotope', which, in broad terms, Powell uses to draw attention to recurring places which make a difference in Wolf's films, like the elevator in his movie about uranium mining, *Sonnensucher* (*Sun Seekers*) (1958/72) (65–67).

One of the most productive tools he borrows comes from Stanley Cavell. Powell suggests that *Sterne* (*Stars*) (1959) belongs to the genre of 'the melodrama of the unknown woman' (77). Following this reading, the

Greek Jewish woman and the German soldier who tries, too late, to help her, endeavour to overcome their scepticism about others, moving beyond isolation and estrangement to what Powell, following Cavell, calls '"attunement" to a larger human community' (84). For Powell, as for Koch and Elsaesser and Wedel, *Stars* is an important work in Wolf's oeuvre and in post-war German cinema, because of the way it deals with the Holocaust. For Koch, the film acknowledges the suffering of the Jews but nostalgically yearns for a time before the Holocaust when it seemed that communism might be a force to prevent it (Koch and Gaines 1993: 67–68). For Elsaesser and Wedel, Wolf's film hovers ambivalently between the false pathos of the German man arriving too late to save the Jewish woman and a masterful pastiche of the tropes of melodrama with which the story is told. For Powell, the portrayal of Jewish suffering is undermined by the very means of acknowledging it, as its specificity is swept up into a larger common humanity that erases all traces of alterity (84). Yet the reference to Cavell's 'melodrama of the unknown woman' (84) also suggests a connection to the wider, halting history of coming to terms with the Holocaust, since one of the key examples of the genre is a film that German Jewish émigré Max Ophüls made based on a novella by an Austrian Jewish émigré, Stefan Zweig, namely *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). To situate Wolf's films in this wider genealogy would be to build on and expand Powell's careful arguments. It would enable a fuller reconstruction of the cultural tools that were developed to portray, remember and come to terms with the destruction of Jewish life and culture during the Holocaust. Such a reading might note the prominent place given to characters speaking Ladino in Wolf's film, just as Marek Goldstein and Herbert B. Fredersdorf included Yiddish speakers alongside speakers of German and Polish in *Lang iz der Weg* ('The way is long') (1948). This wider story is not exactly the one that Wolf thought his films belonged to, but it is a story that would allow his integrity, skill and creativity as a filmmaker to be situated and relativized alongside his stubborn commitment to the GDR which persisted even where, as in the case of *Solo Sunny*, he had inadvertently created a catalyst for criticism of the regime.

Powell's study is the first English-language book devoted to Wolf's films. It will perhaps prompt a translation of Jacobsen and Aurich's (2018) sympathetically critical biography. The readings of *Sterne*, *Solo Sunny* and the autobiographical *Ich war neunzehn* (*I Was Nineteen*) (1968) are particularly revealing and raise questions for further studies to investigate: to what degree did Wolf know and copy Hollywood genre films like *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942) and *To Have and Have Not* (Hawks 1944) (37)? What was the process which led Wolf to accept that he could not show the mass rapes by the Red Army during its advance through Eastern Germany in *I Was Nineteen* (139)? What are the details of Wolf's engagement with Fassbinder's films (205)?

Powell's book will be an invaluable starting point for both scholars and students who wish to grapple with Wolf's brilliant but flawed oeuvre. Many DEFA films are now available with English subtitles on streaming services like Kanopy. This book is an excellent companion for all those who want to use such resources for a critical engagement with the cinematic legacy of the GDR.

References

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