

COMPARISONS IN GERMAN AND AMERICAN FILM

Workshop in Berlin, June 19, 2005. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI) and Kiran Patel (Humboldt University). Participants: Edward Dimendberg (University of California, Irvine) and Anton Kaes (University of California, Berkeley).

This workshop was part of a series of workshops within the project on Competing Modernities sponsored by the Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart. (See *Bulletins* 35 and 36 for more information on this project.) The workshop's purpose was to discuss the role played by film in German and American modernization and to formulate a series of theses that would be explored in the essay by Anton Kaes and Edward Dimendberg. As the only contribution to the Competing Modernities project addressing a cultural form, the essay on cinema must negotiate the dual challenge of acknowledging the determining character of symbolic expression and mass reception in modern societies while simultaneously specifying the distinct social character of film in Germany and America. It was agreed that cinema is uniquely suited to provide a cultural articulation of the nation, fusing as it does literature, theater, music, and architecture, and frequently appropriating the collective voice traditionally associated with these older media.

Kaes and Dimendberg proposed narrative cinema as the master cultural discourse of industrial modernity. Culturally specific representations of space, power, gender, and class attain visibility in American film genres such as the western, or in uniquely German genres such as the *Bergfilm*. Here space is confirmed as particularly significant, for just as German film contains no precise equivalent to the filmic treatment of American suburbs, Hollywood cinema lacks a genre comparable to the *Heimatfilm*.

By virtue of its determining economic influence upon the global film industry, however, Hollywood remains the force against which other national cinemas inevitably define themselves. Thus the markers of regional identity that German cinema has appropriated from "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" to the present, in particular an emphasis upon film as a fluid visual language, must be viewed as product differentiation strategies through which German film can be "branded" on the world market.

The nature of this relationship, whether it is best understood using notions of competition, dialogue, intertwining, negotiation, or exchange, was discussed at length with reference to German exile and emigre filmmakers such as F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, and Douglas Sirk, whose work contributed much to the stylistic evolution of Hollywood. In the post-

1945 period, the paradox was noted that German film obtained the greatest international response by engaging with its own national history, unlike Hollywood, which generally achieves global popularity through genre films such as comedies or action stories.

In conclusion, the workshop considered how national film styles might evolve in an age of globalization and increasing mobility of capital, ideas, and cultural values. In what sense is it still possible to speak of national cinemas when film financing and creative personnel have become globally dispersed and contemporary German films display an increasingly conspicuous mastery of Hollywood techniques and conventions? These are but some of the topics discussed in the workshop that will be addressed in the essay and in continuing dialogue with other members of the research team.

Edward Dimendberg and Anton Kaes