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The Secret Story of Postwar German Federal Cinema

by Olaf Möller

Film culture in postwar Germany never stood a chance, neither in the FRG nor the GDR: the crimes committed by the Nazi regime were *too far beyond everything*, and German cinema had supported these unthinkable atrocities. Fascism, as Italy demonstrated, was forgivable, especially when it came up with an attractive realist aesthetic soon to become Neorealism. On the other hand, the mass genocide perpetrated by the Nazis certainly couldn't be excused. Both Germanies would officially consider their shared Nazi history as an aberration: Germany had a twelve-year blackout – the GDR wanted to reconnect with its Weimar Republic left-wing past, while the FRG reclaimed their own liberal-bourgeois tendencies, minus their involvement with the Nazis. Meaning: the FRG was all about turning a blind eye to many, many things. Cinema was an easy target in that situation: easy to reject and condemn without having to really pay a price – people could even continue to work, they just had to live with the occasional rebuke or even campaign... Essentially, everybody was waiting for the Young German Cinema, even if it had no name, face or identity back then. Even in 1945 everybody knew something would happen in the future – it had to – with a new generation, and then *everything* could go back to some kind of *normal*. Until then, the period was one best left unmentioned in the future because the people who'd worked and often prospered during the Nazi regime defined it. And everyone knew it. Yet, they made films, knowing full well that things had been much more complicated... The finest among them – Helmut Käutner and Wolfgang Staudte just to mention two names that then, as well as now, commanded respect and rarely got it, even though they merit it – actually worked towards said future without them.

There's a restlessness, an unease, a disquiet in the FRG's cinema from the late 40s until around the mid-60s, a awareness of all those contradictions the country was made of, often articulated in an aesthetically surprising way. Simply said, the FRG's postwar cinema was by far not as primitive and opportunistic, as hell-bent on making people readjust and *forget* and as far from the country's realities and problems as it officially has been and is still made to look. There's a whole misfit cinema to be discovered – little-known treasures by the likes of Käutner, Staudte and Josef von Baky, but also smaller masters like Harald Braun...

the cinema of the re-migrants and the visitors and all those in transit – Frank Wisbar and Robert Siodmak and Walter Reisch, John Brahm and Victor Vicas and Franz Cap [František Čap], Roberto Rossellini and Živorad Mitrović and Aleksander Ford – and those who always seemed like strangers, in many ways displaced souls lost in a lonely place – like Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Leopold Lahola and Peter Lorre – whose gazes and glances at the country often proved disturbingly different... there's a rarely discussed *noir* culture found in the mean streets as often as in the dark forests and the heathers haunted, a cinema made by mavericks like Hans H. König, Peter Pewas, Gerd Oswald and – maybe the strangest of all – Veit Harlan... there's a Heimatfilm whose masterpieces – the opaque horrors of **Rosen blühen auf dem Heidegrab** (Hans H. König, 1952); the bleakly wild **Riso amaro**-variation **Heiße Ernte** (Hans H. König, 1956); the despair-riddled, Dreyer-originated **Barbara - Wild wie das Meer** (Frank Wisbar, 1961) – that speak more clearly about the FRG's innermost abysses than any of the more obviously responsible works of social concern... there's a whole generation of actors and actresses far more fascinating, mesmerizing, and contradictory in all the interesting, enlightening ways...

There's a whole side to the FRG's cinema and history waiting for to be (re)appraised. Coming soon at this festival.