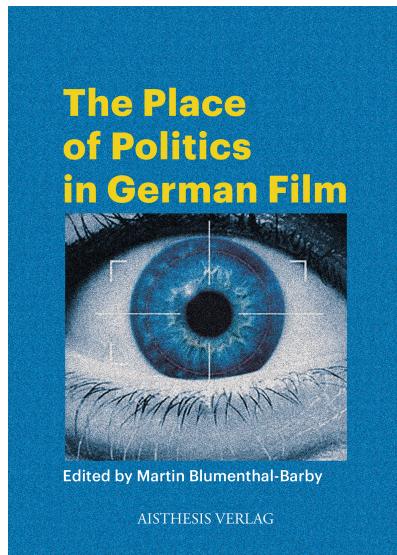


Leseprobe

Martin Blumenthal-Barby (Ed.)

**The Place of Politics
in German Film**



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Martin Blumenthal-Barby

Topologies of Film and Politics

Introduction

A book that, by dint of its title, claims to explore the place of politics in German film might appear, in the eyes of the expert, naïve or, at best, overly ambitious given the sheer complexity and intricacy of the topic—assuming that indeed one agrees to speak of “one” topic. These plausible concerns appear even more valid if one considers that the essays in this volume do, in fact, explore overtly political questions addressed in seminal films ranging from the Wilhelmine era (Nicholas Baer) through the Weimar years (Kata Gellen, Anton Kaes) and the Nazi period (Valerie Weinstein), the postwar years (Jaimey Fisher), East German cinema (Larson Powell) and West German cinema (Christina Gerhardt, Thomas Elsaesser), and finally postunification Germany (Jennifer Hosek, Carsten Strathausen, Angelica Fenner, Brad Prager). Yet what is commonly deemed to be the question of the place of politics in German film, including such issues as “censorship laws, national film subsidies, famous bans and scandals, representations of politicians in film, the contribution of films in political movements and debates,”¹ and so forth, is largely elided here or addressed sporadically and unsystematically. Given the enormous scope of the topic, it might seem advisable to keep the focus of an investigation into the place of politics in German film narrow by confining it to a particular historical era. A high degree of cohesion could, in turn, also be aided by a clearly defined thematic or aesthetic set of questions.² Perhaps the seemingly overwhelming task evoked by this book’s title can be kept within bounds if we, for the time being and cursorily, pursue the question of how scholars have heretofore approached the issue of the place of politics in German film. Each of the films treated here in roughly chronological order could, more or less compellingly, be associated with a chapter of German film history, which, in turn, has been at the center of scholarly work and has occasioned penetrating analyses, not least concerning the question of “the place of politics in German film.”

I

If we were to ask about the place of politics in German film with regard to Wilhelmine cinema, Thomas Elsaesser's *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades*, for instance, provides the following insight:

The fact that the cinema in Germany has been ... judged as a political phenomenon has given rise to a number of ideological histories (about the cinema reflecting authoritarian, nationalistic or racist values) and ideologies serving as histories (implicitly told from the point of view of "art," or "realism," or of "progressiveness"). Such politicisation assumes that German cinema, too, is part of that "Sonderweg" (separate development) into modernity, with all the catastrophic consequences implied in the titles of the German cinema's most famous studies, Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* and Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen*.³

In the light of such hasty politicization, Elsaesser insists that we resist the temptation to differentiate between the *political* and the *aesthetic* registers of films from the Wilhelmine era:

So many films from the early period ... display such a sophisticated grasp of filmic processes and contain so many references to the cinematic situation as one of "doubleness" that one is tempted to make "zweimal gelebt" the motto of Wilhelmine cinema itself. Yet for this very reason one must not jump to conclusions, and *differentiate between the formal analysis* of such duality and duplicity (referring us to the complex ontology of the cinema as representational mode), and the "*political*" or *ideological interpretation* these features invite as proof of a national style or the propensities of the national character. The presence of motifs of the double and structures of sometimes vertiginous symmetry ... indicate that the dividing line between self-consciously literary (and later, national) cinema known as the *Autorenfilm*, and popular genre cinema comprising detective series, melodramas and comedies was not as sharp as is sometimes assumed.⁴

It is noteworthy that Elsaesser's reflections on the issue of politics in German film are aligned with a methodological proposition according to which we should abstain from the perhaps too convenient differentiation "between the formal analysis" and "the 'political' or ideological interpretation." It is

precisely this question of differentiation and demarcation that will, in the next few pages of this introduction, surface again and again and present itself, albeit uniquely configured each time, as a challenge symptomatic of critical approaches to the issue of politics in German film.

Suspending any elaborations on Elsaesser's nuanced commentary for the moment, our question concerning the place of politics in German film could be continued with regard to Weimar cinema and studies of that era.⁵ Treating films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, as well as Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, Anton Kaes, for instance, in his seminal *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, notes:

Articulating an indirect, but more poignant understanding of trauma than many traditional war movies, these films *translate* military aggression and defeat into domestic tableaux of crime and horror. They *transform* vague feelings of betrayal, sacrifice, and wounded pride into melodrama, myth, or science fiction. ... Forced to find a language for extreme psychological states, shell shock films developed *aesthetic strategies that pushed the limits of visual representation*. In their fragmented story lines and distorted perspectives, their abrupt editing and harsh lighting effects, they mimic shock and violence on the formal level.⁶

Increasingly relevant in our context is precisely the process of “translation” or “transformation” through “aesthetic strategies” described here. Highly sensitive to the aesthetic idiosyncrasies of the films he discusses, their intricate relations to and subtle repercussions for particular political issues, Kaes elaborates: “*Shell Shock Cinema* attempts to study films as entities that arise from and exist in concrete historical moments; that supply *aesthetic* responses to ... *political* ... determinants.”⁷ This balanced and balancing approach, which regards films as “complex appropriations of the world and unique interpretations (not reflections) of historical experience,” directs our attention to the very methodological issues that are at stake in this book and that lead Kaes, in the context of his study, “to apprehend the forces that generated a cinema of shell shock.”⁸

If the significance of Weimar cinema lies in its “contribution to the creation of a community sharing a ‘historical imaginary’” on which a “twelve-year regime with its six-year reign of terror has exerted a quite overpowering pull,”⁹ then this overpowering pull has undoubtedly exerted its force, in different ways, on scholars and critics of German film as well. Lutz Koepnick,

in *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema between Hitler and Hollywood*, for example, investigates “how Nazi entertainment features during the 1930s aspired to bring Hollywood to the Third Reich and then how Hitler refugees attuned German cultural material after 1939 to the demands of the Hollywood studio system.”¹⁰ Nazi entertainment cinema, he submits,

deserves special attention ... because it charged the act of going to the movies with eminently political functions. Employing highly rationalized modes of industrial production and distribution, Nazi cinema appealed to both the national and the popular in order to break Hollywood’s hegemony in Europe. It capitalized on populist notions of linguistic, cultural, and racial belonging to integrate the viewer as a consumer into the imagined community of the nation.¹¹

While the “place of politics in German film” presents itself here as aligned with certain “political functions,” Koepnick leaves no doubt as to how much the absorption of the audience and the creation of an “imagined community of the nation” rely on the pivotal role of aesthetics, in particular its auditory aspects:

We cannot speak about German cinema after 1933 without speaking about how it used synchronized sound to manage the viewer’s attention. Throughout this book I argue that the legacy of German national cinema was by no means only visual. In contrast to those who have canonized the canted angles of expressionist film art or the muted design of the New German Cinema as *the* dominant language of German filmmaking, this book emphasizes that German cinema since the early 1930s ... was decisively audiovisual.¹²

Koepnick astutely demonstrates how “Nazi film practitioners embraced sound film to orchestrate collective fantasy and capture the national imagination,” showing the ways in which “German cinema aspired to offer audio-visual spaces in which the sounds of German voices and musical traditions could integrate the viewer into the national community.”¹³ More specifically, he elucidates how “Nazi cinema *transformed* linguistic and musical expressions into ideology,” all the while stressing that “what was communicated seemed to matter less than the very act of vocalization and intonation, the magic ritual of speaking, singing and hearing.”¹⁴ As for the issue of the relatedness of aesthetics and politics, *The Dark Mirror* provides an illuminating

instance in its emphasis on how Nazi cinema “sought to become national by rearticulating the centrality of sound and music to nineteenth-century definitions of German national identity.”¹⁵

Shifting the historical focus yet again, Johannes von Moltke, in *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema*, explores the *Heimatfilm* genre, which, “with its roots in the *Heimatliteratur* of the late nineteenth century,” he argues,

weathered the sea changes and realignments of German (film) history in the twentieth. It endured by offering variations on the idea that there is “no place like home” in every one of the different cultural and political contexts in which it flourished—from the Wilhelmine Empire to the Weimar Republic; from the Nazi era and the rubble years after World War II to the founding of the Federal Republic in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East; from the student movement in the late 1960s to the years since unification in the 1990s.¹⁶

What, von Moltke ponders, “have been the defining features of each of these moments in the history of the genre?”¹⁷ While seeking a comprehensive perspective, he pays particular attention to the 1950s, viewed, until not long ago, as “the quintessential ‘bad object’ of German film historiography.”¹⁸ In light of our guiding question of the place of politics in German film, von Moltke crucially notes:

Placing the German cinema of the 1950s in perspective ... requires that we maintain the cold war dual focus on what is “German.” Especially with regard to such a long-standing cultural keyword as *Heimat*, an East-West view can yield not only the predictable *ideological*, and perhaps *aesthetic*, oppositions between two warring systems, but also significant areas of continuity and overlap and the occasional ideological reversal.¹⁹

The concepts of “politics” and “aesthetics,” no doubt, coalesce in what von Moltke, via Rick Altman, describes as *Heimat*’s “genrification,” understood as a “gradual convergence of the *Heimat* idea, its use as a point of reference in reviews and popular reception, and a growing corpus of films.”²⁰ At the same time, the notions of “politics” and “aesthetics” appear to provide, in their distinct treatment, crucial methodological parameters and, as such, precipitate a host of questions: “Is there a common concern to [*Heimatfilme*], and if so, how does that concern register? Are there overlapping narrative patterns,

thematic approaches, visual motifs or strategies? Are there personal or institutional continuities to be traced, and if so, do they reveal anything about the aesthetic or textual logics of the *Heimatfilm*?²¹ Such questions are of particular interest to us here as they (irrespective of the highly perceptive ways in which von Moltke succeeds in developing and answering them) provide a broader sense of how the issue of politics in German film has been approached and what sort of topological parameters have informed scrutiny of it.²²

The question of the place of politics in general and of the relation between politics and aesthetics in particular permeates Daniela Berghahn's *Hollywood behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany*. Berghahn starts by reminding us that

with the exception of some internationally acclaimed masterpieces of East European New Wave cinema, the majority of films made behind the Iron Curtain have remained unknown in the West or have been summarily dismissed either as political propaganda or as depictions of drab socialist life, devoid of glamour or entertainment value.

"Mostly," she maintains, "their aesthetic qualities have been denied outright."²³ Against this background Berghahn suggests that "the films best suited to invalidate the prejudices commonly held against socialist film art ... are those which transgress boundaries of aesthetic and political orthodoxy and which, consequently, fell victim to state censorship."²⁴ Addressing the question of politics in German film, Berghahn declares:

I shall explore how East and West German feature films evoke ... "themes of nation." ... The selection of films discussed in this book is thus based on their thematics or, more specifically, to what extent they engage with themes of the German nation. The most prominent ones are the theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past, i.e. the Third Reich); the appropriation of Germany's cultural tradition and heritage; the critical examination of contemporary German society; and German re-unification.²⁵

To be sure, "in examining how ... feature films narrate these themes of nation," Berghahn seeks to address both "the diachronic development of themes and modes of presentation."²⁶ Notable in the context of our discussion, though, is precisely the methodological infrastructure underlying her analysis, in

particular its pronounced dualistic treatment of “plot” and “style” or “politics” and “aesthetics.”²⁷

The question of the place of politics in German film inevitably brings the New German Cinema to mind and the politically inflected works by West German filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Werner Schroeter, Alexander Kluge, and Edgar Reitz. Of course, there is a substantial corpus of critical literature, including such significant studies as Timothy Corrigan’s *New German Film: The Displaced Image*, Thomas Elsaesser’s *New German Cinema: A History*, Caryl Flinn’s *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style*, Anton Kaes’s *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, and Eric Rentschler’s *West German Film in the Course of Time: Reflections on the Twenty Years since Oberhausen*, to name but a few.²⁸ For our purposes, it may be useful to turn to Julia Knight’s 2004 *New German Cinema: Images of a Generation*, a concise volume published as part of Wallflower’s Short Cuts series, which seeks to address scholars and students alike and to establish putative models of how filmic works and specifically the works of the New German Cinema might be tackled. “It was the films’ engagement with contemporary West German reality,” writes Knight,

that made them so significant, since it was reality that seemed to have been consistently denied in the films of the 1950s. In Germany, dealing with contemporary reality often meant confronting the recent Nazi past ... a history that many preferred to forget but one that had so clearly influenced the present. Eric Rentschler has therefore characterised the films as “the quest for alternative images and counter-representations.”²⁹

Against this backdrop Knight—“rather than offer[ing] a comprehensive overview of the thematic issues addressed by the New German Cinema”—seeks to explore various contemporaneous issues as they “emerge across a range of films in order to explore some of those counter-representations”:³⁰

the presence of the *Gastarbeiter* in West Germany; the rise of urban terrorism in the 1970s; the “remembering” of the experience of Nazism; the role of American cultural imperialism in shaping the experiences of the post-war generation, especially with regard to Hollywood cinema; and lastly, the development of the women’s movement which had a powerful effect on West German society as a whole and hence on film-making

too, where it addressed important questions about history and how we document it.³¹

Knight eventually notes that “the counter-representations offered by many New German Cinema films raised important questions about West Germany’s self-understanding and in fact constituted a series of counter-myths about German identity in the post-war era.”³² Hence, if we consult Knight’s study in light of our concern with the place of politics in German film, it appears to be precisely this “endeavor to represent a contemporary reality that had previously been largely excluded from post-war German cinema.”³³ “Many of the New German Cinema films … explored and in turn raised questions about ‘being German’ in the post-war era—that is, about German identity,” she writes.³⁴ The place of politics in German film thus figures here as the formation and enunciation of “national identity,” understood as perpetual “process” rather than static phenomenon.³⁵ Interestingly, what characterizes Knight’s discussion of “national identity … as a form of mythic narrative”³⁶ is a certain penchant for considering the “themes” she identifies as constituents of that mythic narrative (namely, “the presence of the *Gastarbeiter*, the rise of urban terrorism in the 1970s, the Nazi past, the experience of American cultural imperialism, and the influence of the women’s movement”³⁷) in disconnect from the material arrangements that appear to produce them. At times it seems as if those political “themes … addressed by New German Cinema films”³⁸ can be reduced to immaterial semantic entities, dissociable from the filmic fabric from which they are derived.³⁹

Needless to say, the political filmmaking of the New German Cinema is frequently contrasted with what Eric Rentschler has characterized as “Cinema of Consensus.” “The supporters of today’s mainstream film-makers,” Rentschler observes with respect to the late 1980s and 1990s,

applaud a German cinema that has a much lighter touch and is far more user-friendly. … Rather than intervening or speaking out, self-avowed professionals like Dörrie, Graf and Wortmann engross and accommodate. They want the cinema to be a site of mass diversion, not a moral institution or a political forum. Quite empathically, the most prominent directors of the post-wall era aim to please, which is to say that they consciously solicit a new German consensus. In this sense the cinema they champion is one with a decidedly affirmative calling.⁴⁰

Whereas, as Rentschler elegantly puts it, the New German Cinema was “a cinema of disenchantment, in equal measure a function of critical fury and utopian resolve, of negative will and reformist design,”⁴¹ the “New Cinema of Consensus” is altogether different:

In those few instances where recent films make *overt forays into political settings*, the malaise of the present is less the function of a German authoritarian legacy that refuses to go away. Repeatedly the Cinema of Consensus presents characters whose primary sense of person and place is rarely an *overt function of their national identity or directly impacted by Germany’s difficult past*. Instead of German tales of martyrdom and suffering, the New Cinema of Consensus offers tableaux of mobile young professionals, who play with possibility and flirt with difference, living in the present and worrying about their future, juggling careers, relationships and lifestyles.⁴²

While Rentschler here expressly deplores the loss of an “overt” political dimension in the pictures that, to a large extent, grew out of “the German film boom of the 1990s,”⁴³ the “marked disinclination toward any serious political reflection”⁴⁴ he observes appears to be aligned with a disappearance of “stylistic idiosyncrasy”⁴⁵ and “formal experiments.”⁴⁶ Indeed, he argues that “although it is resolutely stylish, the [Cinema of Consensus] lacks a distinctive style: however professionally crafted, it is unabashedly conventional in its appearance and structure.”⁴⁷ Hence he concludes that “the Cinema of Consensus provides an interesting, if ephemeral, chapter in German film history”⁴⁸—a chapter that, we might extrapolate, marks, with regard to our question of the place of politics in German film, a peculiar non-place (which, of course, is still political in some sense). What appears particularly revealing in our context is that this non-place of politics, according to Rentschler’s analysis, does not ensue from the loss of an ostensible political dimension alone; the existence of a politically reflective cinema seems similarly contingent on a degree of stylistic self-consciousness and aesthetic mediation.

This question of the relation between politics and aesthetics emerges in Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager’s rich collection *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* with regard to the “films made in Germany since the turn of the millennium.”⁴⁹ “This period,” they state, “has seen the collapse of consensual filmmaking, which is to say that the consensus building and ... affirmative cinema pervasive in the late 1980s and 1990s is no longer dominant”;⁵⁰

Despite the wishful thinking of some German producers and audiences, German cinema did not succeed in wholly exorcising difficult political ... themes. Regardless of their apolitical aims or even, paradoxically, owing to their insistence on aesthetic autonomy, many of today's German films are discussed in political terms, and today's debates are the same ones that attended West German film in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, the period defined by the politics of the New German Cinema's most significant works. The issues that were important then are important now as well, and like ghosts they have returned to Germany's screens. For this reason, the door has been opened for a commensurately political mode of inquiry to return to criticism.⁵¹

Notably, Fisher and Prager approach the question of the place of politics in German film in both thematic and structural terms. The "tendencies in today's German cinema vary," they write, "yet the films' politics—their orientation toward Germany's divided past, their working out of wartime guilt, and their willingness to challenge audiences with formal innovation—serve as a key basis for compassion and are the starting point for each of the essays in this volume."⁵² At several moments, they emphasize that there is "a link that connects the *aesthetics* and *politics* of key contemporary filmmakers such as Oskar Roehler, Faith Akin, and Christian Petzold with Fassbinder, Kluge, and others."⁵³ The New German Cinema's "legacy" is to be understood "both politically and aesthetically."⁵⁴

Notably, if we were to delineate the place of politics in contemporary German film (which, in the purview of this volume, assumes a rather prominent position), it is striking that, as Fisher and Prager remark, in the films of such filmmakers as Tom Tykwer or Dani Levy,

no clear political agenda emerges. ... Levy is clearly a provocateur ... yet the role of the provocateur has to be differentiated from that of politically engaged filmmaker. Moreover, that which has distinguished Tykwer's work has less to do with any explicitly understood political position than it does with his style—his highly saturated colors, his use of slow motion, and his preferences, in some cases, for MTV-style editing.⁵⁵

For intimately related reasons, Marco Abel, in his contribution to Fisher and Prager's volume, "Imaging Germany: The (Political) Cinema of Christian Petzold," argues that "the politics of [Petzold's] moving images lies in their particular *style* of engagement with the logic of contemporary capitalist

culture.”⁵⁶ Indeed, Abel parenthesizes the word “political” because Petzold’s pictures, he contends, “put the very notion of the political at stake. These films are not political because of their *content*. ... Rather, Petzold’s films can be considered political because of *how* his images produce the world of their fiction.”⁵⁷ Put differently, “the images we find in [Petzold’s film] *Yella* are not so much images of capitalism as they are *imaging* capitalism on its own terms, heeding its effective modulations of speed and weight, of force.”⁵⁸ Thus Abel concludes that “Petzold’s films can ... be considered political—not despite, but because of their affirmation of aesthetics,”⁵⁹ and thereby describes a striking transmutation of “politics” from the level of thematic statement to the level of aesthetic structure.

Similarly concerned with this nexus between politics and aesthetics are Paul Cooke and Chris Homewood in their 2011 *New Directions in German Cinema*, which provides one last instance in our brief survey of critical accounts of the place of politics in German film. The volume sets out to “explore the present state of German cinema, offering detailed examinations of a number of films and filmmakers that have helped shape German film culture since 2000.”⁶⁰ Not unlike *The Collapse of the Conventional*, Rentschler’s “abidingly pessimistic snapshot of the state of German national cinema taken at the end of the 1990s” serves as a point of departure here.⁶¹ Rentschler, the editors remind us,

identifies the most visible mode of filmmaking at the time as a “cinema of consensus” that lacked “oppositional energies and critical voices”, a cinema that stood in stark contrast to that of the previous generation, particularly those associated with the New German Cinema. ... However, as filmmakers turned away from social engagement to stories that did not appear to be specifically German *in either their form or content*, German cinema lost much of the international appeal enjoyed by the New German Cinema.⁶²

“In the first decade of the millennium,” Cooke and Homewood maintain, “the notion of a ‘cinema of consensus’ remains a key concept in discussions of contemporary German film. At the same time, we see the debate Rentschler’s essay began continue to develop as the cinematic landscape has shifted.”⁶³ What appears striking is that those shifts regarding the place of politics in German film are, once again, identified as curiously two-pronged: “During the last decade,” Cooke and Homewood argue, “many of the marginal filmmakers Rentschler mentions in his earlier essay, such as Tom Tykwer,

Hans-Christian Schmidt and Fatih Akin have moved into the mainstream, producing films that are both *aesthetically* challenging and offer a more complex *critical assessment* of the state of the German nation than the earlier comedies.⁶⁴ This combination of *critical political assessment* and *aesthetic innovation* emerges again and again to the point where it assumes the status of a tacit methodological framework: “We find filmmakers looking more broadly at how *aesthetic experimentation* in the tradition of the New German Cinema can go hand in hand with the kind of *social critique* it offered.”⁶⁵ “With regard to the Berlin School in particular,” Cooke and Homewood emphasize, “the *topics* and *aesthetics* they choose to explore [question] the type of vapid individualism we see portrayed in the comedies of the 1990s, the vacuous society of this earlier decade being replaced with slow-paced, evacuated frames.”⁶⁶ To be sure, what interests us here is not the plausibility of these propositions per se but certain methodological assumptions pervading them. And it is in this vein that we encounter yet another, idiosyncratically configured, instance of the relation between “politics” and “aesthetics” and its highly complex correspondence to that of “content” and “form” or “themes” and “structures.”

II

What I hope to invoke in the next few pages, and what will, in its complex density, likely transpire from the readings assembled here, is a sense of how the strangely antithetical yet simultaneously inextricable nexus between “politics” and “aesthetics” might be conceived. We have encountered a variety of critical accounts that address, in one way or another, the question of the place of politics in German film. Again and again that question has conjured up a certain methodological model, as part of which we see political concerns and aesthetic structures correspond in particular ways. In some instances it has seemed that the place of politics in German film is associated with certain *themes*. Other cases conceive of the place of politics as ensuing from a joint emphasis on *political issues and aesthetic features*. And on one occasion the question of politics indeed appears to be situated in the sphere of *aesthetics*. What these introductory remarks, and in some sense the volume itself, hope to bring about is an exploration of the place of politics in German film that adopts the distinction between politics and aesthetics even while, if only hypothetically, calling it into question. Thus I shall take up the question of the relation between politics and aesthetics, which so far

has presented itself in different configurations and degrees, and complicate it by introducing yet another category, that of “the political,” a concept that, as understood here, is not identical with “politics” but is precipitated by the *singularly* negotiated interdependence of political themes and aesthetic structures. This category of “the political,” on which we shall dwell in some detail and which, in the broadest sense, might be seen as a response to the question of the place of politics in German film, can, as the individual essays will demonstrate, be addressed only in the context of close readings of particular films or film sequences and their *specific* ways of weighing political and aesthetic valences. Perhaps we can tackle this issue of “the political” by starting out with the simplest of questions: What do the various films engaged in this volume actually discuss? What is their ostensibly political dimension? Only after having addressed these questions shall we address that less graspable notion of “the political,” which will inevitably direct our attention to the various films’ aesthetic dimensions, their poetic infrastructure and rhetorical fabric.

III

In the course of this volume’s roughly chronological narrative, each of the twelve essays, embracing some ten decades of German history, is explicitly and unambiguously concerned with political issues and themes. First, Nicholas Baer tackles the relation between German cinema and Zionism by exploring two films that “reactivate long-standing myths about the fashioning of a new man”: Otto Rippert’s *Homunculus* (1916) and Paul Wegener’s *The Golem: How He Came Into the World* (1920).⁶⁷ Reading these films as “allegories for the formation of a new Jewish man and the foundation of a modern Jewish nation-state,” Baer demonstrates how early German film “provided a forum in which Jews negotiated different models of masculinity and nationhood.” Concerned with a similarly contentious political issue, Kata Gellen elucidates the intricate discourse on residency and mobility that imbues F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922). Her essay delves into the history of immigration on the eve and during the formation of the Weimar Republic so as to highlight a particular sociopolitical dimension of the film: the ingrained (and typically anti-Semitically inflected) contemporaneous “anxiety” about the “circulation of homes” and the “mobility of populations.” Next, Anton Kaes discusses Karl Grune’s *Die Straße* (1923) with regard to a most contemporary issue, the question of surveillance. Kaes focuses on a

“moment” in an ephemeral sequence that emerges as symptomatic of the film’s “underlying theoretical project—the nexus between urban modernity and the disciplining power of vision.” Focusing on the popular genre of Third Reich film comedy, Valerie A. Weinstein investigates a particularly revealing example of comedy’s semantic polyvalence “across the political registers of gender [and] sexuality,” Karl Ritter’s *Capriccio* (1938). Against the backdrop of the paradigmatic structures of Nazi biopolitics, Weinstein dissects the film’s intricate “cross-dressing narrative” and calls its “adherence to manifest National Socialist ideals” into question.

Shifting the focus to the little-examined era of the 1950s, Jaimey Fisher asks “how Germany went from a generally apolitical genre cinema of the 1950s to the politically engaged and critical cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.” Rather than concentrating on the dominant genre of *Heimatfilme*, Fisher probes examples from “the decade’s second-most popular genre,” the war film, putting selected films, in particular Frank Wisbar’s *Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?* (1959), into dialogue with the political debates of that period. In a densely contextualized analysis, Thomas Elsaesser contrasts the omnibus film *Germany in Autumn* (1977/78), which includes contributions by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, and Alexander Kluge, among others, with Heinrich Breloer’s *Death Game* (1997), scrutinizing *Death Game’s* “rewriting” of *Germany in Autumn’s* treatment of the political crisis in West Germany in the fall of 1977 “through repetition.” Christina Gerhardt tackles the precarious issue of terrorism in Germany as negotiated in Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane* (1981) and Christian Petzold’s *The State I Am In* (2000). She shows how *The State I Am In* “engages (West) German history, yet shifts the site of historical trauma” depicted in *Marianne and Juliane* “from the fascist era (and its effects on the Post-World War II West German youth) to 1970s terrorism (and its effects on the children of the 1968er).”

Larson Powell looks at how German films have functioned and are functioning as mnemonic vehicles and as an “archive” of German history; he asks “to what extent ... DEFA’s political narratives [were] ‘haunted’ by the crypt of traumatic pasts such as the Stalinist terror of the 1930s.” An obliquely related question is broached by Jennifer Ruth Hosek, who approaches the topic of the place of politics in German film “through an intertextual and intratextual look at Christian Petzold’s *Gespenster* trilogy.” She specifically argues that Petzold’s trilogy “refashions surveillance in Harun Farocki’s documentaries and critical engagements with fascism and capitalism in Fassbinder’s BRD trilogy melodramas.” Also concerned with the Berlin School, Carsten

Strathausen examines the themes of geopolitics and surveillance, with particular focus on Christian Petzold's work, in the context of today's increasing regulation and "control of individual bodies and human populations." Next, Angelica Fenner takes up Fatih Akin's comedy *Soul Kitchen* (2009), which, Fenner suggests, appropriates "characteristics associated with the *Heimatfilm*" in order to probe "the shifting relationship between space and place under globalization." Finally, Brad Prager examines Lars Kraume's *The Coming Days* (2010), a film that "depicts a world embroiled in another Gulf war, in conflicts over natural resources, and in which terrorism has become ubiquitous."

To be sure, each of the films discussed here takes up questions of utmost political relevance (the issues of surveillance, immigration policy, violence, and terrorism, among others) and thus appears to lend itself to straightforward assumptions about our topic. Yet what if "the place of politics in German film" defies easy identification or localization, what if politics cannot be contained or confined within German film as this collection's title—"The Place of Politics *in* German Film"—seems to suggest? It is in line with these questions that the volume's first objective, the representation of politics in film (explored along historical trajectories), is accompanied and challenged by a second concern: Do these films, beyond re-presenting or mirroring politics, present or produce some sort of speaking power on their own? To what degree do they—rather than merely constituting a reflection *of* politics—respond *to* politics by engendering a singularly configured mediatic force, thereby perturbing the assertions ostensibly made? Or, to offer yet another way of phrasing the issue, how do the explicit political discourses communicated *in* these films correspond to the dynamics brought about *through* film, through the cinematic medium itself?

To address these questions, the volume accentuates the performative elements and rhetorical moves that configure the political effects (rather than statements) of the films at issue. Kata Gellen, for example, discusses the ostensible "processes of migration and mobilization" in Murnau's *Nosferatu* as inextricably tied to the film's stylistic properties, in particular its sophisticated mise-en-scène. Carrying a similar aesthetic (rather than merely propositional) inflection is Jaimey Fisher's analysis, which suggests that "politics can emerge even within that which is usually taken as anathema to political engagement, namely, genre cinema." Anton Kaes's reading (paradigmatically for the tension described here) revolves around one particular "moment" in Karl Grune's *Die Straße* that "exceeds" and, indeed, complicates the film's "narrative needs," thus invoking its hardly obvious, self-reflexive dynamic

of “supervision” and “control.” Thomas Elsaesser shows how the filmmakers of *Germany in Autumn* are, surprisingly, “seduced by symmetry, balance and repetition,” thereby allowing “their narrative to achieve almost ‘classical’ closure, which contaminates their version of German history.” Brad Prager’s essay (again *mediatically* inspired) scrutinizes Lars Kraume’s *The Coming Days*, “widely critiqued for its apparent desire to encompass everything.” Prager reads the film’s *thematic* “over-reaching” as a deliberate *formal* “statement about cinema’s inevitable embeddedness in the present, and about its inability to encompass the entirety of the future.” Such attention to cinematic force imbues Angelica Fenner’s analysis of Fatih Akin’s “self-styled appropriation” of the *Heimatfilm* genre with regard to his particular use of “citation,” which, she argues, “reinforces the binaries already underpinning that uniquely German film genre and thereby collapses potentially progressive politics into the realm of farce,” ultimately bringing about some sort of “anti-*heimat* film that inadvertently reifies” the very differences it seeks to destabilize. Fenner’s essay offers a particularly compelling case of how a film’s mediatic qualities can challenge and disturb its putative “message” to the point where the question of how a film is structured crucially determines its political “position.” In each of these cases it appears that the particular employment of mediatic space constitutes less a correlative or distinct dimension than the very condition for a political force to transpire.

While the decision to assemble close readings is apparent in the context of this project, we still might ask what selection criteria are brought to bear here. Readers will note, for example, that the collection includes only one essay on Nazi entertainment films (Weinstein) and merely two essays that focus only in part on the New German Cinema (Elsaesser and Gerhardt), even though political cinema in the German context is often treated as synonymous with the Oberhauseners’ interventions. At the same time, the volume includes several essays on contemporary German film, a disproportion that might call for some explanation. For even if one hypothesizes the advent of a most recent political cinema in Germany—and the readings in this volume certainly point in that direction—the decision for or against the inclusion of individual films and filmmakers remains. Why, for instance, would a volume on the place of politics in German film not include an essay on the omnibus film *Germany 09* (2009), made by some of Germany’s most highly regarded contemporary directors in an attempt to address the “state of the nation”? Why not an essay on Riefenstahl’s propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) instead of one on a Nazi entertainment film? The answers to these questions cannot but call the questions themselves into question. What is at

issue here is not the conventional conception of politics, which can be fixed to certain statements, messages, plots, propositions, or political directives. To be sure, all the films addressed in this volume concern themselves with political themes, although each of those films could, no doubt, be replaced by a thematically more emphatic, a politically more ostensive, or an ideologically more motivated example. Yet the notion of “the political” at issue here is precisely not situated on the level of content or themes or subject matter, nor on the level of form or aesthetics or manner *per se*. “The political” emanates from the considerably more elusive sphere of enactment or performance or staging, a sphere that precisely describes the specific *interdependence* of a thematic concern and its structural enactment, of politically charged assertions and their particular aesthetic renditions. Thus, if the question arises of why this volume performs readings of these films and not of others, the answer can only refer to the particular efficacy of “the political,” its productive interplay of thematic and structural aspects, of political concerns and aesthetic features, to the point where that very distinction appears questionable, where the very approach of dichotomizing politics and aesthetics, as helpful an analytical tool as it might be, seems to sidestep the issue at stake—the issue of “the political.”

What many of the readings performed in this volume show, their indisputable diversity notwithstanding, is how the specificity of a political concern appears not merely reflected but indeed generated or produced by a singularly negotiated interplay of subject matter and presentational manner. The relevance of this nexus between medium and message, form and content, emerges in the light of a distinction popularized by contemporary philosophers and political theorists such as Claude Lefort, Jean-Luc Nancy, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Ernesto Laclau. At issue is the distinction between “politics” (*la politique*), in the conventional sense of establishing and maintaining principles central to the preservation and reinforcement of political discourse, and its elusive other, namely, “the political” (*le politique*), which designates a moment of disturbance or interference, posits an-other force that “defies appropriation,” and, as such, presents a latent threat to established political orders and their codified modes of representation.⁶⁸ Notably, this distinction between “politics” (*la politique*) and “the political” (*le politique*) intimately resonates with our distinction between thematic discourse and performative enactment—a correspondence that Claude Lefort explicitly evokes when he describes “the political” as a “*mise-en-forme*,”⁶⁹ thus characterizing the realm of aesthetics, form, or mediality as a “covert” yet most authentic “accomplice of the political.”⁷⁰

Against this background the present volume takes seriously the political claims put forth by the films in question while keeping an eye on the disruptive, unsettling force that challenges and disturbs political discourse—not in the sense of establishing another politics but in the sense of producing a force that eludes political systematology entirely. It discusses the statements that ostensibly political films make while taking their performative perturbances into account. While all the essays take up some sort of political theme, the themes find themselves, more often than not, challenged, disturbed, and in fact *dis*-placed by the specific mediatic features of filmic texts. The question of “place” and “*dis*-placement” thus emerges—in the context of this volume—as the crucial problem of our discussion. Politics (*la politique*) aims at positioning that which is not properly placed, which is not where it “belongs”; it denotes the business of placing and placement.⁷¹ By contrast, the political, argues Jacques Rancière, “is that which moves a body from the location assigned to it, or which changes a location’s destination.”⁷² *The Place of Politics in German Film* describes—that, perhaps, is the surprising insight of this volume—always also that moment of *dis*-placement, and it is precisely that moment of displacement (*le politique*), that mode of perturbing and resisting political discourses and their topical efficacy, that the volume hopes to accentuate in the context of our understanding of the relationship between politics and film.

This collection, beginning with two early twentieth-century films and ending with Lars Kraume’s most recent *The Coming Days*, hopes, to begin with, to assemble fresh readings of German film and its relation to the question of politics. It does not seek to provide a comprehensive or cohesive overview of the topic. Not only would that be almost impossible; it also would be diametrically opposed to the elusive nature of the political force at issue. In a much more modest fashion, the volume seeks to provide a configuration of readings (“a collection of flowers,” if you will, in the sense of the Greek ἀνθολογία, from which the English “anthology” is derived) that individually speak to the topic at issue. Beyond that, the volume seeks to offer a meditation on our understanding of the relation between film and politics by rethinking this linkage—a reconception, perhaps a heightened sensitization, to that political force that is incommensurable with “politics” yet inherently tied to it, a mediatically generated “political” thrust of a different kind.