

# Introduction

## The aftermath of the First World War

‘The war experience is an ultimate confirmation of the power of men to ascribe meaning and pattern to a world, even when that world seems to resist all patterning.’<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Eric John Leed’s *No man’s land* puts the main concern of the present study in a nutshell, that is, the problematic nature of ascribing meaning and form to an unprecedented historical experience, the experience of the First World War. It is the reflection of research into German films about the First World War that were made during the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup> This study will focus on cinematic representations of the catastrophe that swept the world between 1914 to 1918 and which was to have profound consequences for post-war Europe and many of its overseas colonies. This study probes the role played by the most popular medium of the twenties in coming to terms with this war. How did the cinematic imagination deal with the war and how were these efforts received by critical viewers? In addition, the present study will explore both the possibilities and the limitations of representing the First World War in cinematic form.

There are several reasons for taking Germany and German war films as the starting point for this study. All countries involved in the war were heavily weighed down by its effects, but I would like to emphasize the differences between Germany and the other warring parties. The circumstances under which people in Germany had to come to terms with the war were not only different psychologically, but also in a broad social, political and cultural sense. After all, Germany not only lost the war, but with two million dead it also suffered a higher casualty rate than all the countries involved. Furthermore, the allies put most of the blame for the war on Germany by forcing it to accept the Versailles Peace Treaty. In the years after the war, this led to what Michael Salewski has called the ‘Weimarer Revisionssyndrom’, that is, the collective aim, supported by government policy, to get the so-called war guilt clause in the peace treaty revised.<sup>3</sup> This war guilt clause and the resulting international pressure to pay huge reparations was considered to be humiliating and unjust by most Germans.

Germany also differed from the other European countries in other respects. When the war had just ended, a brief but violent outbreak of revolutionary fervour swept across the country, ending the old empire and ushering in the first parliamentary democracy in Germany in the form of a republic. In order to make a success of this new form of government, traditional ways of thinking as well as traditional power structures would have to be broken down. In the

end, however, those supporting the republican principles failed to gain the political influence needed to unravel old networks of aristocratic, military, economic and bureaucratic power. The seeds of anti-democratic protest and increasing political polarisation had thus already been sown in the earliest stages of the Weimar Republic. If we then consider the impact of the economic crisis that swept German society between 1919 and 1923, it is clear that the fledgling democracy was very much prone to political conflict and social turmoil.

It is an open question whether the process of coming to terms with the war was actually impeded by these circumstances. On the one hand, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that such a process could only begin under stable social conditions. On the other hand, the period between 1924 and 1929 saw such a regeneration of spirit that the Weimar period has since become known as the Golden Twenties. The late twenties were marked by an unprecedented zest for life, with the young cultural elite throwing themselves into new forms of leisure, more liberal (sexual) manners and new fashions that had mostly blown over from the United States. New developments could also be observed in the arts, architecture and design.<sup>4</sup> However, the Canadian cultural historian Modris Eksteins takes the view that this attitude often led to the repression or denial of the war, or as he puts it, 'a flight from reality'.<sup>5</sup> This would suggest that stable conditions do not by definition encourage people to come to terms with a deeply traumatic experience. Even so, both the period of stability and that of crisis saw an upsurge in cinematic representations of the war.

## **The War Experience**

Let us give some thought to the war experience itself for a moment. Besides the question how the social circumstances of the time played a role in coming to terms with the war, this of course also depends on the nature of the experience. The experience of the war was new in nearly all respects, not only because of the confrontation with the enormous casualty figures, but also because of the way the war was conducted. The offensive strategy which led to an almost static defensive line of trenches and the use of modern arms technology caused a permanent state of shock and feelings of disorientation in many of those of involved. Though every war is a traumatic experience for many people, this war for the first time brought about the recognition that there was such a thing as a 'war trauma', mostly in the form of the so-called 'shell shock'.<sup>6</sup> Conditions in the trenches were indescribable. The soldiers were exposed to artillery fire for days on end, they would stand knee-deep in mud for days or even weeks surrounded by lice and rats and the stench of decomposing corpses. There were long periods of utter boredom and times when any motivation to fight

had all but disappeared completely. After all, how often were they forced to give up terrain they had conquered only just before? In recent analyses, this condition has been interpreted as a 'crisis of masculinity': 'A gender crisis ensued within the male self when the irresistible forces of conventional martial courage ran up against the unmovable object of stalemated war.'<sup>7</sup>

Some of the military men saw the exposure to danger and stress as an ultimate (virile) life experience. Men like Walter Flex and Ernst Jünger expressed this condition of euphoria and comradeship when they were still in the front lines.<sup>8</sup> Romantic notions of firm male bonding ('Männerbünde') had been popular before the war, especially in German youth movements such as the Wandervogelbewegung and the Freideutsche Jugend.<sup>9</sup> Such notions were then mostly an expression of protest and resistance against the sluggishness and materialism of middle class society. After the war, such war-glorifying ideas played an important role in the anti-democratic movement known as the 'Konservative Revolution'.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of whether the front experience was positive or negative, it was certainly extreme. Like the positive experiences, the negative ones also found a release, people 'came to terms with them' in various cultural practices. One of these was the German cinema, and especially the war films that are the subject of this study. Before focusing on these films, it is important to consider the meaning of the term 'coming to terms' as it is used in this book.

It appears that 'coming to terms' can be understood in two different ways, namely as a psychological process, in the sense of 'overcoming something', and as the concrete expression of something in something else, for example the expression of an experience in literature, film or in a work of art. Experts agree that the one follows naturally from the other. The Dutch historian and psychologist Eelco Runia wrote that: 'People not only need to come to terms with reality in order to make it credible, but also to make it bearable' and 'narratives enable us to come to terms with events, or rather, constructing narratives that are credible to ourselves as well as to others is in fact coming to terms with events.'<sup>11</sup> This means that there has to be some form of communication, an exchange of narratives. Even though coming to terms with things is, as the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan writes, an individual matter, it does not take place in isolation: 'There are all kinds of notions, models, narratives available in society which someone can use in editing his life's story.'<sup>12</sup> Besides that, De Swaan continues, it is unavoidable to present this narrative 'to others, if only to see whether the structure and coherence he has found is convincing to other people'. From these remarks follows the question with which narratives and notions the German war films have played a role in coming to terms with the war. Other relevant questions concern the power of persuasion these films brought to their representation of the war and whether they brought any sense

of coherence to the fundamental incoherence of the war experience or if they left this incoherence intact.

Collective processes of 'coming to terms' can only be interpreted theoretically. The question which role war films played in this process can therefore only be answered tentatively. It is my opinion, however, based on the views of Runia and De Swaan, that this kind of research offers insight into the function German war movies had in the social and cultural process of mourning or 'coming to terms' with the war experience. By exploring the various themes, narratives, cinematographic means, film reviews and relevant contexts, we can at least arrive at some idea of the way German film culture engaged with the war experience and what notions, models, narratives and images the films offered to the public. According to De Swaan, 'even the most individual process of coming to terms with a strictly personal experience is also a form of social labour, because nobody can fully keep clear of the views and images that operate in conversation, reading or public discussion'.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that films played their part in the collective mourning process becomes clear when we consider that the earliest war movies were produced in 1925 and 1926, when Germany was still without a national war memorial. A number of these early films were labelled 'national monuments' by the critics. They saw the films as cinematic 'monuments' to the memory of the war and its casualties. In reviews of later war films, critics would often return to this memorial function, which they also claimed was in the interest of the youth.<sup>14</sup>

There is more, however. After all, some experiences are so horrible and have such drastic consequences that words and images cannot describe them afterwards. Perhaps the most convincing example of this is the problematic representation of the holocaust.<sup>15</sup> Though the First World War front experience is in many ways incomparable to the holocaust, it is relevant to ask how problematic any representation or communication of that experience was. For this reason, Hayden White considered the First World War one of the 'holocaustal events' that have occurred in this century. The extremely violent nature of such historical events complicates the process of remembering and mourning:

They cannot simply be forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.<sup>16</sup>

The problematic nature of fashioning representations of the First World War not only emerged from the war films I have studied, but also – and often even more explicitly – from reactions in the press and from censorship authorities. It

goes without saying that these are therefore indispensable sources for this study.

Modris Eksteins stresses that people may sometimes need an entirely new or different language to be able to come to terms with terrible experiences:

Traditional language and vocabulary were grossly inadequate, it seemed, to describe the trench experience. Words like courage, let alone glory and heroism, with their classical connotations, simply had no place in any accounts of what made soldiers stay and function in the trenches.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, although courage, heroism and honour were ultimately not the driving forces that allowed men to survive their stay in the trenches, these terms were used in many testimonies written after the war.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps these terms no longer carried the meaning they had before the war. In fact, processes of ascribing meaning to something are very complicated. Though a notion such as heroism lost much of its lustre, and turned out to be inadequate as a means of ascribing meaning to reality, it proved indispensable to many, precisely because of the unspeakably horrible nature of their experience. Especially nationalists, monarchists or neo-conservatives needed to make some sense of the war experience in this way. They were the inheritors of a socio-political system that considered war a legitimate means of resolving conflicts. It was absolutely unacceptable to them to declare the war devoid of meaning. That is why they refused to accept that the German army had been beaten in the field, saying the troops had been stabbed in the back by the home front. Nor did they feel Germany should bear any guilt for the outbreak of the war, and any attempts to put the blame on Germany were renounced as the so-called 'Kriegschuldlüge' or war-guilt lie. While heroism was held up to all German soldiers as a guiding principle and as a means of achieving unity, there was in actual fact no such thing. Even earlier than Eksteins, Robert Weldon Whalen had qualified the idea of heroism by introducing the notion of 'Zerrissenheit'. 'Some people become lost in the resulting chaos, others desperately search for new symbols, still others repeat the shattered old formulas ever more frantically. (...) People discover they no longer speak the same language. (...) The result is not disillusionment, but a bitterly painful sense of dissonance, of Zerrissenheit.'<sup>19</sup> This also meant that 'there was no national mythology that could explain the meaning of four long years of mass violence'.<sup>20</sup>

Whalen offers a balanced perspective from which to study the representation and description of the war experience. In spite of the crisis of meaning and the alleged indescribable and unrepresentable nature of the war experience, which in a psychological sense also implies a blocked mourning process, there have been countless attempts to describe and represent the war. This is borne out by the huge numbers of letters, diaries, poems and novels written during

and after the war. The same is true for photographs, postcard pictures and films, which were often just as penetrating in their depiction of the brutal war experience.

### **Research into war films: film historians**

The place of the war in literature, painting, monumental architecture, photography and postcard pictures has often been the subject of research.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore all the more remarkable that the German war films from the Weimar period have largely been ignored. The period itself has been studied more often than nearly any other period in German history before the Second World War.<sup>22</sup> More than thirty war films were made between 1925 and 1933. While this fact has been observed, it has never been the subject of serious study.<sup>23</sup> If war films were studied, the impression was given that only one film represented the German war experience, *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT* (Lewis Milestone, 1930). The German-dubbed version of this American film created such an uproar that interest in other (German) war films was shifted to the background. The film was based on Eric Maria Remarque's bestselling novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929). A survey of the reactions that *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT* caused in the press, with the general public and in political circles, can be found in a book by Bärbel Schrader, which anthologizes contemporary criticism.<sup>24</sup> This study not only shows how much a (critical) film representation of the war was able to stir up emotions, even more so than the novel, but it also reveals the huge role that the war past played in cultural and political life in the Weimar Republic. In fact, the book also shows that film criticism is indispensable source material for anyone studying the social process of ascribing meaning.

This does not answer the question why so little attention has so far been given to German war films. I would like to offer a number of possible explanations and give a survey of what various authors have asserted about German World War One films. If we confine ourselves to experts in the field of film history, we see that a canon has been created in literature dealing with 'the' Weimar film. Furthermore, expressionism and social realism take up a dominant position in that canon. The first movement refers to the avant-garde of the pre-Weimar period, when expressionism in painting, graphic art, theatre and poetry soared to new heights. Only after the expressionist movement was well past its peak – many representatives of expressionist art were killed in the war – was it discovered by the film industry. The first truly expressionist film was *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (Robert Wiene) from 1919, one of the first films to contribute to the artistic status of the cinema.<sup>25</sup> A number of other, less extreme, expressionist films followed in its wake. Films that are generally con-

sidered to be part of this 'movement' are still an important starting point for studies dealing with film in the Weimar period.

The second 'movement' referred not so much to something that was already past its peak, but to the contemporary present. While expressionist films were mostly made during the first half of the Weimar period, most realistic films can be situated in the period from 1924-1929, the so-called stable phase of the republic.<sup>26</sup> This period has become known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity. In realistic films, the emphasis was not on the characters' inner perception of their environment, as was the case in expressionist films, but on objective and concrete reality. In the first place, this meant that these films took as their subject matter various modern phenomena, including the many wrongs in contemporary society. The films dealt with the many excesses of metropolitan life, poverty, class differences and prostitution, and also with the dynamics and pulse of the big city. Images of the swinging nightlife, new fads, fashions and trends, all kinds of leisure pursuits and technological gimmicks and innovations were first introduced to a broader public in films. Secondly, some directors chose to shoot their films in a much more realistic way, regardless of their subject matter. A number of war films from this period, and from the one immediately following it (1929-1933), can also be called realistic films. Some of them are even explicitly 'documentary' in character. These films will be discussed within the context of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* phenomenon in the third chapter.

The film-historical canon for the Weimar period has thus been selected from expressionist and realist films. The decisive factors in making this selection were aesthetic criteria. This means that we know relatively much about a very small minority of all the films produced during the Weimar period, on average around two hundred every year.<sup>27</sup> Films that failed to create much sensation in an aesthetic sense, mostly box-office successes, received little attention.<sup>28</sup> As we will see, German war films are not aesthetically uninteresting in every respect, but to most film historians, they are still largely *terra incognita*.

This does not mean, however, that film history fails to offer useful perspectives from which to study the Weimar war films. The approach that exclusively studies the canon and the work of the 'great masters' meanwhile becomes outdated. Much the same is true for the approach that only focuses on the film text itself. In the seventies and eighties, studies by Robert Sklar, Garth Jowett, Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery widened the angle by putting great emphasis on the social, political and cultural contexts in which films circulated, in short, on cinema as an institution and as a cultural practice.<sup>29</sup> The standard work on classical Hollywood films by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger also deliberately departs from this canonical approach.<sup>30</sup>



Studies by the above-mentioned authors and the works of Stephen Bottomore, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, Charles Musser, Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio have ushered in a new approach in film history. The focus has so far mainly been on the gaps in film history, and this has resulted in extensive studies of especially the early period (1895-1917). This approach, called New Film History, shifts attention from the isolated film text itself to the context that surrounds the screening of the film. This context consists of social and cultural frameworks, and also includes the immediate contexts of cinema and programme. Early cinema was intricately tied up with entertainment such as variety shows and vaudeville.<sup>31</sup> One of the effects of this new approach has been an increase in the development of theory on various film-historical and historiographical issues.<sup>32</sup> Researchers began to study source material that had until then been neglected or ignored because it was deemed too unconventional. In addition to film criticism, programmes and reports in specialist journals, sources such as fan mail, correspondence by people involved, regulations and provisions by local authorities, insurance agencies and fire departments, advertisements, posters, postcards and building licences all contributed to the creation of a different image of this early period in film history.

Representatives of the new approach in film history no longer make the analysis of an individual film text their top priority, if only because more than half of the films from the early period have been lost. The present study charts a middle course by analysing individual films as well as discussing the various contexts to which these films refer.<sup>33</sup> My approach will be explained in detail in the final paragraph of this chapter.

The fact that German war films have rarely received detailed and serious attention does not mean that they have therefore gone unnoticed. However, books about war films in general are limited in scope and often serve to list films rather than to analyse or contextualise them.<sup>34</sup> Studies of the First World War film deal mostly with American films or anti-war movies.<sup>35</sup> Standard works usually devote no more than several paragraphs to individual German war films.<sup>36</sup> In short, there has never been that much critical interest in the thematic genre as such, and the perspective is all too often confined to the so-called 'masterpiece' or author approach. As I indicated earlier, this means that discussion has been narrowed down either to films that are thought to possess great artistic merit, or to films that are seen as important steps in the development of a director's individual and recognizable style. This is why a film such as *WESTFRONT 1918* by Georg Wilhelm Pabst, released some months ahead of its American counterpart *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT*, will seldom be absent from such studies. After all, a number of his films are considered to be major representatives of the New Objectivity.<sup>37</sup>



## Siegfried Kracauer

The German critic, essayist and journalist Siegfried Kracauer is one of the best-known experts in the field of Weimar film culture. His standard work, *From Caligari to Hitler*, written during his American exile shortly after the Second World War, and based on his experience as a film journalist with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, is unrivalled in its comprehensiveness and depth. Kracauer saw film as an important symptom of the modern age, an age marked by the all-pervasive influence of metropolitan and mass culture. With Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, Kracauer was one of the major cultural 'seismographs' of the Weimar era.

Kracauer's intention in *From Caligari to Hitler* was to uncover what he called 'deep psychological dispositions predominant in Germany from 1918 to 1933' by means of a psychological and sociological (and impressionistic) analysis of German films.<sup>38</sup> The films were said to offer an insight into the collective mentality of the German people and also served as evidence that besides social, economical and political circumstances, psychological factors played a significant part in the rise of the Nazi regime. According to Kracauer, the fact that the Germans later turned out in massive support for National Socialism had already been foreshadowed by the themes of Weimar films.<sup>39</sup> As early as 1927, he wrote that 'the existing society is mirrored in these films' and that 'the mindless and unreal film fantasies are the Daydreams of Society, in which actual reality surfaces and repressed desires are given shape and form'.<sup>40</sup>

Kracauer gained much admiration with his approach, but he also received much criticism. The critics were concerned with his highly debatable methods of interpretation and his unclear criteria for selection. Kracauer also conducted his analysis one-dimensionally and finally from the later perspective of National Socialism, thereby assuming that he could reveal latent meanings in Weimar films as an omnipotent interpreter. No wonder that Kracauer found what he had been looking for, a strong authoritarian predisposition on the part of the German people.<sup>41</sup> Although I do not subscribe to his school of thought, I would like to mention his huge knowledge of the period and its cinematography. He also tried to interpret the meaning of the First World War films produced during the Weimar period, although he did not approach them as belonging to a 'genre'. It is therefore useful to examine his assertions on these war films.

Kracauer rightly places the war films – he mentions no more than nine in total<sup>42</sup> – in the period after 1924. He writes that this stable period of New Objectivity was a time when traditional German dispositions towards power no longer seemed to be able to cope with the democratic and republican policy principles: 'Authoritarian dispositions fell into a state of paralysis.'<sup>43</sup> Even though a

time when the democratic forces were prevailing might be seen as fertile ground for coming to terms with the war, Kracauer observes a 'widespread inner paralysis' caused by the inner collective mentality's wish to restore the authoritarian structures of the past.<sup>44</sup> According to Kracauer, this state of paralysis was mirrored in the rapid decline of artistic standards in films. After all, expressionism was then already past its peak. A number of realistic, neutral films reflect this new, objective position. Kracauer also included a number of war films in this category, among them not only the historical films that are central to this study, but also a number of broadly farcical soldier plays.<sup>45</sup> According to Kracauer, more serious war films such as *UNSERE EMDEN*, *DER WELTKRIEG* and *U9 WEDDIGEN* mirrored 'the existing paralysis of nationalistic passions'<sup>46</sup> that he saw lurking behind the false appearance of political neutrality. My analysis of critical film reviews will show that this was true only to some extent.

According to Kracauer, the intellectual climate begins to change towards a more critical position around the year 1928, when *Im Westen nichts Neues* was serialized in the *Vossische Zeitung*. It was only from 1930 onwards, however, that the true dispositions appeared: 'The German film became a battleground of conflicting inner tendencies.' This was expressed in two different types of film: those anti-authoritarian in character, such as *WESTFRONT 1918* and *NIEMANDSLAND*<sup>47</sup>, and those with more authoritarian and nationalistic tendencies, such as *BERGE IN FLAMMEN* and *MORGENROT*.<sup>48</sup> According to Kracauer, films in the latter category were ideologically far more convincing than those in the former, and in addition, they formed more of a unity. The conclusion was that the authoritarian films had contributed to the establishment of National Socialism.<sup>49</sup> The question is whether we can arrive at the same conclusion with regard to the other war films which Kracauer does not mention. Tempting though it is, wishing to interpret war films from the perspective of National Socialism is too simple and therefore ultimately also misleading.

While Kracauer attempted to show that the Weimar films had a specific meaning that could be deciphered by looking at them from the perspective of later events, my study aims to discover what different meanings were ascribed to war films at the moment when they appeared, and what role the films and the reactions they prompted played in coming to terms with the war experience. My approach may therefore be characterised as historicist and retrograde. In do not a priori consider war films to prefigure or symptomize the National Socialist era, unless the relevant film indicates as much in specific terms, or if contemporary critics characterised the films as overtly nazist. In placing the films against the specific background of the German past (and the role played by this past when the films were in circulation), I see them as cultural practices expressing the memory of the war and a historical awareness of

the war. To paraphrase Johan Huizinga's well-known definition of history, the present study tries to answer the question how, in other words, by what kind of narratives and cinematic means, the Weimar war films gave an account of the past. Since it is impossible to answer this question solely on the basis of film analysis, critical reviews from specialist film journals and daily newspapers of different political hues play a major role in this study. As indicated earlier, these texts are the only primary sources that open up the wide variety of opinion on cinematic interpretations of the war past.<sup>50</sup>

### **Cultural historians: Eksteins, Winter and Mosse**

The lack of interest in German war films cannot simply be attributed to the limited number of films that have been preserved. True enough, more than half of them are lost, but those that are still there have hardly been examined. I have defined these films as war films because of the fact that the war plays a prominent role in the narrative, in other words, the characters' actions are in large part determined by the war. 'Documentary' films are films that explicitly take the war as their starting point. This means that a film such as *FRIDERICUS REX* (1923) or any other film about a Prussian topic and the so-called mountain films, which contain latent references to the war, are here left out of consideration. My criterion for defining a film as a war film has been whether it is an explicit depiction of the war or not.

Now that we have looked at the attention film historians have given to the First World War films, the question arises whether cultural historians have actually offered a valid contribution, especially since they are slowly losing their diffidence with respect to (audio-)visual sources and have begun to engage in the study of historical representations. Three major cultural historians who have studied the war experience and the process of coming to terms with the First World War, and who have in addition given relatively much attention to post-war Germany, are Modris Eksteins (1989), George Mosse (1990) and Jay Winter (1995).<sup>51</sup> The works of these authors have been a major inspiration for the present study, especially because of their use of non-traditional sources. Even though these authors approach their subjects from different angles, they share an interest in phenomena connected to mass culture, representations that were aimed at mass audiences, the people who had no access to the written press and the (audio)visual media. This is especially true for Mosse and Winter. The work of these three cultural historians is closely connected to the recent rise in interest in the history of mentality and experience.<sup>52</sup>

The main starting point of Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* (1989) is the notion that the First World War has been a decisive factor in the rise of cultural modernism and the pursuit of emancipation. Germany was the most progres-

sive country in Europe both in terms of economic modernisation and the development of art. Germany was, in Eksteins' words, 'the modernist nation par excellence'.<sup>53</sup> Eksteins also has an eye for the positive consequences of the war. In his view, the war not only put a heavy burden on society but later produced what he calls 'a celebration of life'. While Kracauer saw this period mainly as a state of escapism, paralysis and artistic decline, Eksteins emphasises the *élan vital* that was expressed in, for example, an anarchic attitude towards the existing values and norms. In the field of music, jazz became popular. The short dress became fashionable, and if women really wanted to look modern, they cut their hair in the boyish 'Bubikopf' style. Sexual etiquette became more liberal as night life for homosexuals flourished, especially in the larger cities. An increased objectivity and functionality could be observed in architecture and design (Bauhaus).<sup>54</sup> One might expect Eksteins to pay much attention to films that mirrored this vitality, or to films that caused a sensation because of their modernity. One need only think of the first German screening of Eisenstein's *BRONENOSIZ POTJOMKIN* (better known as *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*), avant-garde Bauhaus experiments, Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS* or Walter Ruttmann's *BERLIN, SYMPHONIE EINER GROSSSTADT*.<sup>55</sup>

However, Eksteins tells us nothing about these films, nor does he pay much attention to war films. This is remarkable when we read the following passage: 'If the past had become a fiction and if it all was indeed flux, then perhaps the cinema, some witnesses felt, was the only appropriate vehicle for capturing the movement to the abyss.'<sup>56</sup> Eksteins devotes one chapter to Remarque's bestseller *Im Westen nichts neues*, but the film version of the book is hardly discussed at all. He did, however, write an article about this film in 1980.<sup>57</sup> There was an upsurge in war literature in the wake of Remarque's novel and, Eksteins emphasizes, also of war films, the 'war boom of 1929-1930'.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Eksteins fails to notice that this upsurge was not confined to this period alone. On the contrary, most war films were made between the years 1926 and 1931. According to the author, the relative rise in interest in the war can be explained with reference to the confusion and disorientation troubling the generation that had grown up during the war. The war had cut this generation off from the psychological and moral ties with the home front and thus from post-war society. According to Eksteins, this made Remarque's novel 'more a comment of the post war minds, on the post war view of the war than an attempt to reconstruct the reality of the trench experience'.<sup>59</sup> I assume Eksteins meant this comment to refer also to the film version of the novel. He goes on to say that this was also true for the reviews, which reflected the post-war 'emotional and political investments'.<sup>60</sup> Although Eksteins makes some interesting observations here, it should be said that they refer especially to anti-war novels and films, which he apparently also considers to be modernist.

However, they only made out a very small percentage of the total production in this field. If Eksteins, on the basis of one anti-war novel, explains the upsurge in literature and films about the war with reference to dissatisfaction with the post-war period, how then can the majority of 'ordinary' war films and novels be explained?<sup>61</sup> Also with reference to discontent with contemporary society or to a desire for the restoration of pre-war civil society? Perhaps. It is more likely, however, that things are more complicated than that, as the present study aims to show. Considering the Weimar period mainly from a modernist perspective leads to one-sided conclusions. In addition, Weimar Germany was troubled by deep divisions, and the 'modern' and the traditional co-existed in a precarious balance.<sup>62</sup>

Jay Winter tries to restore that balance in his book *Sites of memory, sites of mourning* (1995). He dismisses the kind of approach represented by Eksteins. While in Eksteins' view, the First World War is a fraction that paved the way for a new era characterised by a modernist language of forms, 'Traditional modes of expression – words, pictures, even music – were inadequate in this situation'<sup>63</sup>, Winter defends the idea that the war did not constitute a completely new departure. 'The overlap of languages and approaches between the old and the new, the "traditional" and the "modern", the conservative and the iconoclast, was apparent both during and after the war.'<sup>64</sup> As a result of his study of ways of mourning for war victims during the interbellum, Winter arrives at the conclusion that precisely the traditional, religious and romantic language of forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were used in the mourning process.<sup>65</sup> This is not only true for prose, poetry and various social practices, but also for visual expressions such as painting, posters and films. War films practised historical mystification by means of a 'sanitisation of the worst features of the war and its presentation as a mythical or romantic adventure.'<sup>66</sup> Some films tried to show the opposite, such as *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT*, *WESTFRONT 1918* and *VERDUN*, *VISION D'HISTOIRE*, but Winter rightly states that these films belonged to a very small minority.<sup>67</sup> In his analysis of several (non-German) war films, Winter confines himself to the theme of the 'symbolic' return of the dead, a theme which runs like a thread through his entire study.<sup>68</sup> Winter's approach offers a correction to the dominant modernist perspective. The meaning of his approach for the present study lies in the question to what extent the war films use traditional symbols and images, and to what extent they can be seen as modernist representations. In addition, I do not exclusively associate modernism with anti-war films, as Eksteins and Winter do in an implicit way.

George Mosse, in his book *Fallen Soldiers* (1990) also confirms that there was mystification and mythologising. According to Mosse, the confrontation with the mass slaughter of the First World War, especially on the western front, has

been the most important and drastic experience. Combined with modern weapons technology and new means of communication, this brought a whole new dimension to the practice of warfare. According to Mosse, people not only revisited the horror in trying to come to terms with this experience, but feelings of patriotism and glory sometimes played an even bigger part.<sup>69</sup>

For some people, it was an absolute necessity to invest the war with some positive meaning and purpose. The idea that all the suffering had been for nothing was simply unbearable. The horrible reality of the war was therefore 'transformed into what one might call the Myth of the War Experience, which looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event'.<sup>70</sup> This myth, which according to Mosse had been created by young war volunteers, fell on fertile ground in defeated Germany, and played an important role in post-war politics.<sup>71</sup> The war experience was mythologised into an idealised and religious experience, complete with its own 'acts of worship' in the form of memorial services and images of martyrdom, heroism and comradeship.<sup>72</sup> Symbols taken from Christianity and nature (mountains, forests, the arch of heaven) were dominant references in the representation of this myth.<sup>73</sup> Mosse not only focuses on cultural practices such as the monument-building and tourist excursions to places at the former front and war cemeteries, but also on seemingly trivial things like picture postcards, kitsch and children's toys.<sup>74</sup> With his views on the construction of this myth, Mosse emphasises a sense of unity which authors like Weldon Whalen, Eksteins, Hynes and Winter have tried to nuance.

Mosse discusses the post war film in only a few paragraphs, concentrating mainly on Germany. He only indirectly mentions the fact that relatively many war films were produced in the second half of the Weimar period. This is hardly surprising, because Mosse's account is based on literature from 1927 (Hans Buchner, *Im Banner des Films*).<sup>75</sup> From this source also derives Mosse's statement that 'German war films at the end of the 1920's have been called singularly realistic', after which he goes on to quote Buchner: 'Soldiers fall before our eyes and writhe in the agony of death, the faces of deadly wounded young men show their pain.' Buchner must have referred to the Austrian war film *NAMENLOSE HELDEN* or the first part of *DER WELTKRIEG*, for other German war films that showed such images were hardly made before 1929. Mosse does, however, consider the genre of the so-called mountain films as surrogate war films because they 'glorified the national image of combative manliness'.<sup>76</sup> This new masculinity plays a central role in Mosse's 'Myth of the War Experience'. Needless to say that images of the new and youthful male hero and warrior, so attractive to the right, continued to fulfil their function under the Nazi regime.<sup>77</sup> Though the similarities between Mosse and Winter are obvious, their interest in religious symbols for example, Mosse considers the myth mainly in

the context of right-wing nationalism, while Winter gives more attention to the everyday practice and the more artistic expressions of mourning. Mosse emphasizes the heroism, while Winter stresses the suffering that has been caused. Both are far removed from Eksteins' notion that traditional language and imagery are inadequate means for conveying and coming to terms with the experience of modern warfare.

Despite the many differences in approach that are apparent in the literature discussed here, the three authors agree on the central notion that representations of the war were not only problematic, but seemed almost impossible in essence. It is true that traditional symbols, myths and fictions fulfilled their functions, but they also stood in contrast to the modern experience of warfare, which was dominated by disorientation, fragmentation, deafening noise and chaos. These 'features' are generally associated with modernist art and literature. The question whether, and if so, how, both traditional and avant-garde aspects functioned in the post-war German war films is not answered by these authors, and the examples of the films they mention can certainly not be called representative.

### **Carrying out the research**

Within the historical context outlined above, the present study aims to answer three main questions. In the first place, which narrative forms and cinematographical means do the selected films use to represent the war experience? Secondly, how did the critics react to the war films? Thirdly, on the basis of the cinematic representations of the war and the reactions they received, what can be said about the process of coming to terms with the war?

These questions will be discussed specifically in each chapter. Two central topics for research emerge from them: the films themselves and the critical reviews (and more generally, the written texts about the films). It is my aim to discover what meanings the war has generated through these texts by describing and analysing the films and the reviews. It is true that studying the specifically cinematic production of meaning is my central concern, but in order to understand its function within a broader social context, this production of meaning cannot be considered independently from reactions in the press. On their part, films and criticism cannot be assumed to exist outside socio-cultural practices.

Another part of the analysis concerns the way the stories are told and the cinematic means that are used, although these cannot be seen apart from each other. This does not imply that my discussion involves a detailed analysis of things such as camera positions, editing and *mise en scène*. My cinematographical analysis focuses on the historiographical means of representation; in



other words, the attempts made in the films to get as close to the past as possible, especially where the battlefield scenes are concerned. With regard to the selection of films, I would like to make the following remark. While this study is concerned with German war films made in the Weimar period, most but not all films from the period will be discussed. The first objective was to make an analysis of the specific way German war films approach the past, not completeness. For war films that are not discussed in these chapters, I refer to the appendix that lists the credits.<sup>78</sup> The omission of several German films is balanced by the inclusion of two Austrian films, *BRANDSTIFTER EUROPAS* and *NAMENLOSE HELDEN*. They offer an interesting view on German war history, and were both released and reviewed in Germany.

A second limitation has to do with the fact that some of the films discussed in this study have been lost. That is why some analyses have been confined to the narrative of the film as paraphrased in programmes and reviews.

One way of researching the special role played by war films in coming to terms with the war is comparing them with what was written about the war in novels of the time. This would cause the research to lean over to the literary field – more than two hundred war novels, memoirs and so on appeared between 1928 and 1932 – and create an overlap with existing research on the subject.<sup>79</sup> Instead, I have only drawn on literature in a strictly intertextual sense, i.e. novels that served as the starting points for the relevant war films.

The literary context is only one of many referred to by the films. Studying the relationships between films and their social contexts is more problematic than one would suspect at first glance. Projecting socio-cultural developments, trends or events onto story contents or cinematographic features of individual films may all too often lead to highly speculative conclusions, as we have seen with Kracauer.<sup>80</sup> It is much better to think of the films as being grouped around one particular theme and having been produced in roughly the same period. In this way, the films can be considered as representing a theme that was of topical interest at the time. This applies to the films that are central to this study, but it does not solve the problem of what they actually mean. We will get some idea of how the war past was perceived at a certain moment, or how the war past should be perceived, but this does not tell us what role the films played in coming to terms with the war, nor how they functioned in the broader social contexts. The contexts of the films are therefore approached as follows: on the one hand, my research draws on data about the realisation of the films; on the other hand, it involves written texts about the films, such as advertisements, critiques and other reviews. Information about the realisation of the films has been gleaned from specialist journals, advertisements and some of the critical reviews. The latter category of written texts in-

cludes a representative selection of articles from the daily press. The main consideration was using source material that was accessible to the general public. Such material would also give some idea of the sources that influenced the perceptions or opinions of the cinema-going public. Since there is hardly any source material about concrete audience reactions, we have to make do with the response of only a very select part of the audience, the representatives of the press. In addition, there are hardly any specific data on the numbers of people who came to see these films, nor do we know exactly how long these films ran in the cinemas. However, some indication of the popularity of the films exists, because lists of the most popular films of a given year were published in the specialist film journals.

I consider the critics that I base myself on to belong to the 'interpretative community', people who contribute to the formation of public opinion.<sup>81</sup> Just as politicians, intellectuals, teachers and clergymen represent authority and influence our world views, critics mould and shape opinion within a cultural practice such as the cinema. They stimulate their readers to form an opinion by arguing for or against a particular film and ascribing a certain value to it, and they also help to establish a certain image about the medium of film in general. Just as importantly, the critical reviews also contain direct or indirect comments on social developments. Such direct references to any text outside the film, such as a book, another film, or a contemporary or historical event, are part of my analysis. In this way, the films are not only placed in a certain context by the opinion leaders of the day, but also by me.

Contemporary critics often reviewed films or gave social comment from a political or ideological angle, since most of the press were aligned to certain political parties. The scope for interpreting the war past, its consequences and the way it could be represented as defined by the ideological positions taken up by the parties: communist, social democratic, left-wing or right-wing liberal, confessional, monarchist or National Socialist. In 1930, someone cynically portrayed a film critic thus: 'He does not judge according to his own feelings, but according to the leanings of his newspaper. He does not write his own opinion, but that of his editors. He does not consider what he has seen, but he takes the interests and connections of his publisher into consideration.'<sup>82</sup> By opting for a broad ideological spectrum I have tried to lend a platform to a wide range of different or even conflicting 'voices' commenting on the war and its cinematic representation. By close-reading the reviews, I have tried to bring the arguments, emotions and the associations with regard to the war itself and the films to the surface. My goal was finding out how the images of war were perceived and for what reason certain films or sequences of film were either rejected or accepted, booed or cheered.

## Press sources

The various 'voices of the press' which are discussed in this study cover the political spectrum from the communist left to the National Socialist right. On the extreme left wing, I have chosen *Die Rote Fahne* (1918-1933) and *Die Welt Am Abend* (1926-1933), published by Willi Münzenberg. While the former was the party newspaper for the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, the latter was connected to the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe – the Leninist Münzenberg had been connected to the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands or USPD, which disbanded in 1922. The difference between the two newspapers was not so great in strictly political terms, but while *Die Rote Fahne* clearly presented itself as a propagandist party paper, the illustrated magazine *Die Welt am Abend* tried to gain a large critical and leftist readership by including long and detailed reports about sports and sensational events. The tone of voice used in *Die Welt am Abend* was therefore less dogmatic and shrill than that of *Die Rote Fahne*. The fact that the latter could not always serve as source material has to do with the many bans and restrictions it had to endure: in total, more than one thousand issues of *Die Rote Fahne* never saw the light of day.<sup>83</sup> Needless to say perhaps that the views of these papers with regard to film tied in with their political positions. *Die Rote Fahne* saw the medium mainly as a means of political education and propaganda<sup>84</sup>, while the less orthodox *Die Welt am Abend* reviewed a broader range of films, mainly in terms of their political connotations but also in terms of aesthetic merits. On the whole, film aesthetics received more attention in papers that were less progressively orientated.<sup>85</sup> Ties between the two communist publications were strengthened after 1928, when *Die Welt am Abend* was issued as an evening supplement to *Die Rote Fahne*.

The social democratic *Vorwärts* (1891-1933) was the main party paper for the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and saw as its task defending the social democratic and republican ideas. In 1929, a *Vorwärts* editor wrote: 'We fight the film industry, because it consciously or unconsciously, openly or covertly, seeks to deride, discredit and undermine the republican form of government and wishes to hinder the international politics of reconciliation between the peoples.'<sup>86</sup>

The leftist liberal press also belongs to the democratic end of the political spectrum. In the present study, it is represented by the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (1868-1934)<sup>87</sup>, the *Vossische Zeitung* (1775-1934), the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Berliner Morgenpost* (1900-1945) and the *Berliner Tageblatt* (1906-1939). These newspapers were not so much aligned to any particular party, but they had loose affiliations with the political orientation represented by the Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP).<sup>88</sup> While there was often no sign of commitment

to democratic principle on the part of right-wing or national-liberal parties such as the Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP), the left-wing liberal papers were committed defenders of the republic. However, they also had their own identities and readerships. The *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, *Berliner Morgenpost* and *Berliner Tageblatt* were popular newspapers with a high circulation, bringing local news for readers in the capital.<sup>89</sup> The well-respected *Vossische Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, published in Frankfurt am Main, were slightly more moderate and focused on 'Bildung'. This attitude tied in with the view on film represented by the DDP that it could serve as a 'demokratisches Bildungsmittel'<sup>90</sup> or means of democratic education. Though the specialist film journals were officially unrelated to political ideologies, there were some differences between them. Politically speaking, *Lichtbildbühne* and the *Filmkurier* stood somewhere between the social democrats and left-wing liberals.<sup>91</sup>

On the right side of the spectrum, there was the national or right-wing liberal *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (1918-1945) which had been led under this name by the industrialist Hugo Stinnes since 1918. This newspaper was politically aligned to Gustav Stresemann's Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP).<sup>92</sup> The paper was generally seen as a mouthpiece for the Foreign Ministry, whose head was Gustav Stresemann. As far as the medium of film was concerned, the newspaper offered a word of warning. Cinemas should not just show 'kitsch films' but stimulate the medium's potential for education by showing so-called 'Kulturfilme' and historical films that illuminated the country's past, such as those about Frederick the Great (see chapter 1).<sup>93</sup> The industry-sponsored specialist film journal *Der Kinematograph* can also be placed in this political category, just like the more neutral organ of cinema-owners, the *Reichsfilmblatt* (1923) and *Der Film* (1916). The *Kinematograph* was clearly aligned to a particular political position, since it was published by the Scherlverlag owned by Alfred Hugenberg, the later owner of the Ufa film production company. The conservative tendencies in most film reviews are obvious.

The two confessional newspapers included in this study charted a conservative yet democratic course, the catholic *Germania* (1870-1937) and the protestant *Der Deutsche* (1921-1935). *Germania* had strong links with the catholic Zentrum party, which saw film as a medium for education, especially in the international political and cultural arena: 'With its help we can have a clarifying, propagandising and persuasive effect on other countries in order to convince them of the notion of Germany's spiritual and cultural standing in the world.'<sup>94</sup> *Der Deutsche* served as the Christian trade union's organ.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the following newspapers can be situated on the far right of the political spectrum: the monarchist (*Neue Preussische*) *Kreuz-Zeitung* (1848-1939), the *Deutsche Zeitung* (1896-1934), the Scherl/Hugenberg newspapers *Der Tag* (1900-1934), the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (1916-1944) and its weekly supplement

*Der Montag*.<sup>96</sup> All these newspapers were extremely nationalist and anti-republican. Politically, they were aligned with the Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP). The *Deutsche Zeitung* was also the mouthpiece for the Alldeutscher Verband, a nationalist movement of industrialists of which Alfred Hugenberg was a member. Hugenberg became chairman of the DNVP in 1928. The *Kreuz-Zeitung* was taken over by the association of war veterans, Stahlhelm. With respect to the medium of film, a DNVP representative put forward that film should fulfil a 'national mission'. The idea was not so much to present films with a clear political tendency to the audience, but to contribute to the following aims: 'It is our generations' mission to reunite and bind together the German people, which has been fragmented into all kinds of different political groups and mavericks.'<sup>97</sup>

The group of right-wing newspapers also includes the National Socialist dailies the *Völkischer Beobachter* (1921-1945) and *Der Angriff* (1927-1945), which was published under the supervision of Joseph Goebbels.<sup>98</sup> Both newspapers were aligned to the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) and represent the 'völkische' or pan-germanic, nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic strains which could also be found in other parties on the extreme right. In contrast to those parties, however, the NSDAP managed to appeal to large parts of the population and grow into a mass movement. But whatever their political differences, the National Socialist newspapers used the same shrill jargon as the communists, and they also saw the medium of film primarily as a propaganda instrument to be used for political manipulation.

## Chapter arrangement

This book has been set up thematically, which enables me to study how different directors captured certain aspects of the war, and if and how a cinematic approach of the same theme changed over time. It is very interesting to compare a navy film such as *UNSERE EMDEN* from 1926 with the remake done in 1932, *KREUZER EMDEN*, however short the intervening six years may seem. The Weimar Republic was subject to major changes in these years. The same is true for the press reactions to both films. During that period, the films and the critical reviews not only prompted discussions about the war, but also about the time in which they were made, the Weimar period. This is why the chapters also address issues such as the war debt, national historiography, memorial services, war monuments, rearmament, the rise of war literature and other issues that are associated with the films.

As was said earlier, the chapters in this book have been arranged thematically. The themes relate to specific aspects of the war. However, this principle of thematic arrangement is not entirely unequivocal. After a chapter that sur-

veys the first three decades of German film history, with a strong emphasis on historical films, the following chapters discuss the films that have been researched for this project. The second chapter deals with films that represent the run-up to the war, and the third chapter discusses the 'war documentaries'. Since two of those documentaries give a filmed account of the entire war, the history of the war is shown predominantly from a German perspective. The other chapters follow a less chronological order. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with films that are tied to specific locations, films that are set on the mainland and films where the action takes place at sea. The final chapter deals with the issue of gender in war films by discussing the representation of the home front and the images of femininity and masculinity that the war films construct. The study closes with a concluding epilogue.

