

Epilogue

Most of the German films about the First World War that were made during the Weimar Republic have been discussed in this study. Twenty-five of the more than thirty war films have been extensively reviewed, all of them films in which the fates of the individual characters are influenced by the war in a very explicit way. All of the films that have been dealt with in this study, except for one, were made in the period 1925-1933.

One of the starting points for this book was the premise that the films contributed to Germany's efforts to come to terms with the First World War. This premise was based on the assumption that, generally speaking, telling or representing narratives is a condition for or means of coming to terms with traumatic events. Narratives create meaning, and they are therefore able to make the war past a subject of discussion, to make it bearable and digestible. The question of the moral implications of this process of ascribing meaning to traumatic events has not been asked, and it figures only very implicitly in this study. The films have been considered in their own contexts as much as possible, and not, as was done in earlier research (Kracauer) in the light of the later rise of Nazism.

The above begs the question how, that is, in what different ways, the war was represented in the twenty-five films. In order to answer this question, it was necessary to analyse the films that have been preserved and to collect as much background information about them as possible. Besides that, it was important to listen to the 'voices' of contemporary German society. The only direct and verifiable statements that have been made about the war films come from film critics. The broadness of the political spectrum which they represented through their specialist or daily publications gave me the opportunity to present the various perspectives on the war films.

The analysis of the twenty-five films has not led to the conclusion that, in fact, twenty-five different narratives were constructed. Although all the films have their own special characteristics, their uniqueness is only relative. It proved possible to arrange the films into a number of groups based on thematic or stylistic similarities. Each chapter covers a certain theme, and within this thematic approach, the differences between the films are discussed. These lie mainly in the contexts in which each film functioned. For example, the anti-war movie *NAMENLOSE HELDEN* (1925) went into circulation in a different socio-cultural context than its (probable) equal *WESTFRONT 1918* five years later, in 1930. In accordance with their varying contexts, these films were also ascribed different meanings.

As a community of experts who form people's opinions, critics functioned as a hinge between films and society. Their reviews contain important points of reference that have in this study been taken as points of departure for placing the war films in various contexts, such as the debate about the war guilt, international relations, national mourning (film as 'monument'), the discussions about re-armament, colonialism, national historiography, war literature, the theatre, and domestic and foreign military films.

The various narratives

Films about the events preceding the war offered the public a simplified synthesis and a romanticised understanding of the documents that were supposed to prove that Germany was not guilty of the outbreak of the First World War. The complex of factors surrounding the origins of the war was reduced to a drama of nobility, a spy story or a narrative of diplomacy. Using these perspectives, history was personified, while 'abstract' causes were literally kept off the screen. Especially in 1914. *DIE LETZTEN TAGE VOR DEM WELTBRAND*, the whole narrative focused on the weak personality of one man, the Russian czar. If the blame could be put on a former enemy, Germany had at the very least waged a justified war, because it had been defending itself. If there was consensus about this, and if other countries might also be persuaded to look at things from this perspective, Germany could possibly attain its goal of putting this part of the past behind it. In reality, however, there hardly was any consensus on the issue. Although people agreed about the need for a review of the Treaty of Versailles, they differed about where to put the blame. There were two options: Germany was either entirely innocent or partly guilty. In both cases, there usually was the suggestion that Russia was the source of all evil. The narrative about the causes of the war was dictated by foreign policy, but, mainly because of the many simplifications, failed to be convincing. Those countries which many Germans believed to be the real culprits, Great Britain and France, could not be accused openly because of the political interests at stake for Germany.

Films about the war at the front can be subdivided into 'documentary' films and realistic fiction films. The former emphasised the objective, 'neutral' and historical-didactic perspective, while in the latter, the evocative aspect of the front experience was the main focus. An important similarity between the two categories was the exemplary approach. In the 'documentary' films, this approach resulted in an interplay between archival footage and reconstructed scenes on the one hand, and an individual's account on the other (with the exception of *DER WELTKRIEG* and *DOUAUMONT*). Realistic front films such as

WESTFRONT 1918 and NIEMANDSLAND were exemplary because of the abstraction of their characters: they were not only part of a group, they had also been typified or constructed as social and national identities. From this point of view, the front experience was a communal experience, in which the positive aspect was embodied by the comradeship between the men, and the negative aspect by violence and death. As a matter of course, these films all ended with the victory of death. Heroism was put into perspective. The characters are not typical heroes who, as in tragedy or romance, manage to rise above their environment. They are not stronger or braver than others, and certainly not more idealistic. They are driven by very human and banal motives, not by honour and patriotism, as war propaganda insisted. Only in this sense – WESTFRONT 1918 and NIEMANDSLAND were a very small minority – was Eksteins right with his contention that traditional notions had all lost their meaning.

Although death was the final destination in both the ‘documentary’ and the realistic films, it was mainly in films of the former category that a connection between the past and the present was forged. The ‘documentaries’ were part of a broader process of social mourning, and they were clearly meant to try and make some sense of the war experience. This was expressed in the closing images, which showed war monuments and military cemeteries.

If the films themselves did not in this sense make a connection between the present and the past, then the critics did. This was certainly true for the films that were made before Germany had erected a national monument of commemoration. Before the monument at Tannenberg was unveiled in 1927, some critics had already labelled certain war films ‘monuments’. These films were given a place in the national remembrance of the war.

It was not without reason that the films with an anti-war attitude were mostly set at the land front, and particularly at the western front. Misery and suffering were the greatest here, the lists of casualties were the longest, and this was also where the real ‘Materialschlacht’ was conducted. The geographical and military-strategic conditions dictated a narrative approach that was very different from the one used in the navy films. A ship was a well-organised and orderly space shared by commanders and crews. Although they lived apart, they were very much in the same boat, both in a literal and in a figurative sense. Things were different at the land front, where most senior officers were well behind the firing line. The relatively clean environment of the ship also contrasted sharply with the inhumane conditions in the trenches. The hardships were of a different nature.

Within the fleet itself, there were different types of ships, the submarine and the surface ship, with different physical spaces that evoked different connotations and also prompted distinctive types of narrative. On the one hand, death seemed much closer in a submarine than in a surface ship, while, on the other

hand, the submarine seemed less vulnerable because it was invisible to the enemy. On both the submarines and the surface ships, the physical space and room to move for the crew were so limited that there was ample opportunity for individual heroism. There was no exemplary approach in a social sense. However, the films did show the adventures of crew members of different ranks, sailors as well as commanding officers.

Another specific aspect of the navy films was the attention for Anglo-German relations. The British were hardly portrayed as enemies at all. In the films about the land front, on the other hand, the enemy, if he was shown at all, appeared mostly in the guise of a Frenchman. Americans were absent as enemies. It was an obvious choice to have the two main rivals at sea also represent the war at sea. It is striking how much respect towards each other was shown by the British and German naval officers. There were feelings of mutual friendship, marriages and pleasant and respectful manners. When war broke out in the films, the characters were forced, much to their regret, to suspend these manners.

In nearly all war films, a prominent role was played by the home front. It goes without saying that there were huge differences between the home front and the battle front. There was a nearly unbridgeable gap between the two worlds of experience, which was probably widened further by the fact that the war was conducted mainly on foreign territory. In this respect, one would probably have to say that Eksteins is right when he says that traditional narratives and notions were absolutely insufficient to make people feel that, somehow, they were part of the front experience. It is a telling moment when the veteran takes his wife to see *WESTFRONT 1918*, twelve years after the war, in order to make her understand at least something of what he had lived through. No film conveys the gap between the home front and the battle front in such a harrowing way as *WESTFRONT 1918*.

Generally speaking, the war films showed two different relations between the home front and the battle front. On the one hand, there were films in which the women at the home front had a supporting role, behaving just as heroically as the men 'outside', which also meant that they paid for their behaviour with their lives or at least suffered a great loss. On the other hand, the relation between both worlds also meant alienation and 'betrayal', the fighting men suffering alienation and degeneration and the women betraying the men, for example by engaging in an extramarital affair. The positive traits and qualities associated with the women that had been left behind were motherhood, widowhood, suffering and courage. Apparently, these were the only qualities that made women useful and available for the fatherland. This seemed impossible for women who were active or potential partners in love. They were shown in

a much more negative light, as if they were the real enemy instead of the opposing armies at the front. Conversely, male characters almost only risked their lives if they were unattached and had nothing to lose. As far as life at the home front was concerned, little, if any, attention was paid to matters such as famine or brutal working conditions. The suffering of the women was limited to sadness at the loss of a husband or son. Some of the films also showed that solidarity that existed among the comrades at the battle front was missing at the home front.

Myths

The question whether the war films offered a reliable perspective on the war was not the central issue in this study, but it has been discussed implicitly. For example, the themes of the films were placed in their historical or historiographical contexts. The aspect of historical reliability was mostly discussed by allowing the contemporary critics to speak for themselves.

Among the film narratives about the war, there were those in which the war was mythologised. In historical myths, controversial issues are ironed out, painful paradoxes are resolved, and the lines between fact and fiction are blurred. Historical myths make certain historical events more palatable, more coherent or more exciting. The actions carried out by certain persons and the significance of certain historical events are blown up, or played down and even denied.

In the German films of the Weimar period discussed here, at least three contentions are made, explicitly or implicitly, that may be considered characteristic for contemporary German modes of interpreting the First World War: Germany is not responsible for the outbreak of the war; Germany has not fought against a recognisable national enemy (after all, there was no clear representation of any one enemy); the German army has, as a matter of fact, not suffered any defeat. In the main, these were myths in which Germany's role in the war was distorted or, with respect to some issues, denied. It goes without saying that these contentions were meant to serve political purposes.

On the basis of the above, we can say that, as far as the causes of the war and the treatment of the enemy were concerned, there was, in a sense, a 'master narrative'. By 'letting critics speak for themselves', it has been possible to show that this dominant (film) perspective on the war did not immediately find general acceptance. Some film critics adopted a position as criticsasters of the dominant discourse. It is not surprising that these were mostly the reviewers of the communist, social democratic and left-liberal daily newspapers. They made distinctions, and they exposed the representation of history directed by the government and by (self-)censorship. Thanks to a free and varied press, there

was an opportunity to discuss matters that were not discussed in the political arena. These reviews indirectly, and often unintentionally, contributed to an increase in the attention that was paid to the less heroic aspects of the war past. This study has confirmed the contention that a number of critics not only commented on films but also offered an account of the social contexts. Critics who propagated myths were mostly working for the conservative press, especially the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, the mouthpiece for the Foreign Ministry.

Although the films dealt with many aspects of the war, they did not give a complete picture of the war. Matters that were neglected often concerned the less spectacular aspects of trench warfare: boredom, drills, rebelling against representatives of the senior ranks, and sexuality (with the exception of *DIE ANDERE SEITE*). Showing military weaknesses was as yet also a taboo. The films tell us almost nothing about insubordination, desertion, violation of international military conventions by the German army, the occupation of Belgium, ill-treatment of the civilian population in enemy territory, wrong strategic decisions or disastrously wrong assessments by army command. Nor did the economic activities carried out by women receive much attention. Only films that emphatically opposed the war, such as *NIEMANDSLAND* and *WESTFRONT 1918*, indirectly paid some attention to these matters. Another taboo was the filmic representation, be it by an actor or by means of archival footage, of Germany's former kaiser Wilhelm II, who had fled to Holland even before the armistice was signed. Not only was he associated with a humiliating defeat – he had fled his own country – but his prestige had also been eclipsed by that of the military heroes Von Hindenburg and Ludendorff. The ban on portrayal by an actor also extended to Von Hindenburg. Whenever he can be seen in a film, it is the general/statesman himself, not some actor. This contributed significantly to his legendary status of war hero.

Critical assessment

The question of when a film performance about the war was considered successful by the reviewers was an important starting point for this study. An analysis of the reviews showed that at least three criteria decided whether a film was appreciated or not: it should be historically reliable and stylistically consistent, and it should contain documentary footage. As we have seen, the establishment of what constituted historical reliability depended largely on what *Weltanschauung* the critic adhered to. In spite of this, the various world views could not always be clearly distinguished from each other when it came to the assessment of war films. Critics of different political persuasions often

agreed, and critics subscribing to the same political ideas had different opinions about war films.

The communists turned out to be the most consistent critics. For them, practically all war films were in effect propaganda vehicles for capitalism and imperialism, and as such, gross falsifications of history. The social democrats were more subtle in their assessment and only complained when the films were not critical enough of the war or if they presented things in too positive a light. The left-liberals had a similar attitude towards the war films. Both the social democrats and the left-liberals proved they had an insight in the historical course of the war and the role played by Germany. They showed appreciation when this role was not presented differently or more positively than it had been in reality, which occurred only rarely in war films.

Critics of the right-wing newspapers were always positive when a film showed heroism and patriotism and did not approach the phenomenon of war too critically. In their reviews, they spread and defended historical myths in which Germany played a glorious role.

It was true for all critics, however, that outspoken tendencies in films were not appreciated, unless they happened to corresponded with the critic's own political persuasion. I would like to point out that this very broad summary fails to do complete justice to the many subtle distinctions that presented themselves in the analysis of the reviews. Nor is it possible to speak in anything but the broadest sense about what the critics said in the period between 1925 and 1933. If we compare the reviews from 1926 with those from the period between 1930 and 1932, we can establish that in those later years, the judgements were more fierce, more critical and more politically charged than at the beginning of the period. This tallies with the increased political polarisation at the end of the Weimar Republic.

Complex representations

Another criterion for critical appreciation was consequence of style. Most of these war films, however, were stylistic hybrids, containing all kinds of footage: archive material, constructions and fiction. When the filmmakers combined these images, the aim was usually to create as realistic an effect as possible. In accordance with the notion of New Objectivity, realism was highly appreciated by the critics, if it was not too revealing. The use of different kinds of footage, however, often disturbed the verisimilitude, which critics deplored. For this study, a simple dichotomy between the 'factually' oriented 'documentary' and the 'fictional' nature of the motion picture is made problematic by the relationship between stylistic consistency (or lack of it) and verisimilitude. We saw this, for example, with respect to the 'documentary' *DER*

WELTKRIEG on the one hand and the 'fiction' film WESTFRONT 1918 on the other. Although they are classified as belonging to different styles, both managed to create a convincing verisimilitude.

The filmmakers' pursuit of as much realism as possible or of the greatest possible illusion of historical authenticity elicited statements about reliability from the critics. A substantial part of every review was therefore dedicated to the tension between fact and fiction, sometimes focusing on content, sometimes on style.

One opinion in particular always featured prominently, namely the almost absolute faith in the reliability of archival footage. Critics considered this footage an authentic representation of life as it had been at the front, failing to take into account, or at least to mention, that most of the scenes were reconstructions. Only very rarely did the critics ask questions about the origin and selection of the archival images. The status ascribed to archival footage was similar to the status of primary sources in historical research. It is striking that even today, this footage is unquestioningly included in documentaries about the First World War.