

Rezension von Jörg Schweinitz, in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 28: 3 (2008), S. 427-429.

**Offene Welten ohne Helden. Plurale Figurenkonstellationen im Film**

MARGRIT TRÖHLER

Marburg, Schüren, 2007

604 pp., illus., bibliography, filmography and index, €34.00 (paper)

Margrit Tröhler's book, the title of which can be literally translated as 'Open Worlds without Heroes. Multiple Character Constellations in Film', defies labels like 'film history', 'film theory', or 'film analysis'. It delivers on all these aspects, while moving beyond them. The author analyzes fiction films that have no single main character or central couple. In other words, this work explores the narratives and representational patterns of multi-protagonist films, analyzing relational networks of

their characters. Since the 1990s, this kind of film has turned into a worldwide, trans-cultural phenomenon. Yet the 'genre' has a long history, starting in the 1920s.

First, the author outlines historical developments. She distinguishes between typological 'open' or 'closed' group constellations. The 'closed collective' and the dialectic filmic representation of such closeness is found as a prototype in Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924) or *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). It is ultimately the clash of collective class subjects which defines the conception of history of these films, and likewise, accounts for their consistent confrontational narration focusing on one central social conflict. In contrast, the German cinema of the same decade had already drawn on character constellations as openly structured groups, for example in Siodmak and Ulmer's *Menschen am Sonntag* (1930). The book's main focus lies on the second case: openly structured groups. The staging of a multitude of almost equally important characters is based primarily on chance, coincidence, and on pure spatiotemporal connectivity—and not on narratives integrated and driven by one single conflict. Tröhler labels this as 'weak narrative dynamics'. Such 'weakening' of plot dynamics and of plot centring leads to an affinity for the observation of marginal matters and ephemeral phenomena. This de-centring is further taken up by the framing and editing, as she points out regarding the de-centred and open framing of characters in *Menschen am Sonntag* (and increasingly in later productions)—thus resulting in a markedly visual poetry. Such an openly structured, de-centred setup not only boosts an attractive play between poles like surface and space or closeness and distance, but also a kind of ethnographic view and it straddles the line between fiction and documentary. These are the major aspects this book is devoted to and which it analyses in depth up to the cinema of the 1990s—presenting thorough case studies of Luciano Emmer's neorealist film *Domenica d'agosto* (1950), and of Robert Altman's modernist film *Nashville* (1975). Based on structural differentiations of this kind, Tröhler further distinguishes the open form into constellations of 'character ensemble' (elaborated on *Life According to Agfa* by Assi Dayan, 1992, and on *Hinter verschlossenen Türen*, Anka Schmid, 1991) and 'character mosaic' (elaborated on *Haut bas fragile*, Jacques Rivette, 1994, and on *Short Cuts*, Robert Altman, 1993). She discerns levels of advancing decentring of character interrelations and narration. This study never remains a mere description of dramaturgic structural types, but approaches in a complex way a multitude of cultural and film aesthetic phenomena going hand in hand with decentred narration.

The author draws competently on broad areas of analytical, theoretical and historical registers of film studies, often exceeding the borders of many concepts derived from cultural, literary, or media studies. The book excels in its consistent and historically embedded (discourse-) analytical approach as developed in the chapter on *Menschen am Sonntag*—related to the historical discourse of 'cross-section films' ('Querschnittfilm', Balázs). Taking that as her starting point, Tröhler also investigates the consequences of a de-centred narration regarding the concepts of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity explored by these films, as regards acting and the represented body images, performance and performativity. Finally, she reflects on the challenges a de-centred presentation poses the spectator. Noteworthy is the consistent explanation of the theoretical discourses from which analytical key terms are taken. This study treats the films as historical constructs, but also the applied analytical instruments. The text resembles a kind of mosaic itself. Tröhler's suggestion to read the chapters in alternate

order can be supplemented by a further—a hypertextual—proposal: to work through the book along the comprehensive foot notes, a feast of meta-theoretical discourse in itself, full of concise and appropriate valuations which in turn can be taken as starting point to explore the corresponding passages in the main body of the text. Readers enjoying theoretical reflection will find the book an inspiring study.

*Offene Welten ohne Helden* neither leaves the impression of being a theory for theory's sake, nor of a pure fact-obsessed historiography. The study achieves something rare, even paradoxical: despite all its historiographical, theoretical, and meta-theoretical facets, Tröhler's exploration comes close to the films' poetry. Moreover, the text develops more than once poetical dimensions within its own intellectual play.

I recommend the book for advanced courses in film studies whose participants like to leave the beaten paths of monologist theoretical 'isms' and want to engage in the polyphonic possibilities film studies offers.

JÖRG SCHWEINITZ  
 University of Zürich  
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### Film Festivals: from European geopolitics to global cinephilia

MARIJKE DE VALCK

Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2007

276 pp., illus., bibliography, index, €34.50 (paper)

An academic publication on the subject of film festivals was long overdue. While the 'festival phenomenon' has grown to mastodon proportions and every self-respecting city seems to be sponsoring its own film festival, little has been written about the creation, development and dynamics of those events that are so important for the history of the moving image. At the same time, it is clear that such a multi-faceted topic provides an extremely hard subject to tackle, whether the author wants to simply compile a detailed chronicle of historical facts concerning film festivals, analyze the financial impact of the creation of such events (and the resulting added value, be it attached to a film or to a city) or photograph the sociological aspects of the 'Festival crowd'. Marijke De Valck, a lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, tries to do all of these, and more, in her *Film Festivals: from European geopolitics to global cinephilia*. As much as we have to applaud her effort for trying, and coming up with a few interesting observations in the process, the final result is ultimately somewhat disappointing.

As a starting point for her research, De Valck uses a series of books that have been published by the main European festivals (Cannes, Berlin and Venice), usually to celebrate a specific anniversary. Most notably, and inexplicably missing from the bibliography here is Adriano Apra's 'Cinquant'anni di cinema a Venezia', the best book so far about the oldest film festival in the world, along with many other volumes that have been edited by the Venice Biennale to commemorate its glories and that, to be honest, are very difficult to find in their French or English version. But when the source has been used, for example in the case of Wolfgang Jacobsen's excellent book