German Film Under the Third Reich

Since most films made under the Nazi regime were either propagandistic or aggressively entertainment-oriented, far fewer really great films came out of Germany in that period than had emerged from the 20's and very early 30's... or for that matter, any major film producing country ever a like period of time. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions... films that were non-political, independently conceived and could compare with the best from all over the world. In the past we've run a number of these: Ferst's "Maskerade", Wysler's "Fahrman Maria", Trenker's "The Lost Son"... and two more tonight.

DAS STALHITLER (THE STEEL BEAST) (Germany, 1935) Conceived, directed and photographed by Willy Zieke; Music by Peter Kreuder; with Arbenz Meg. 70 mins.  (No subtitles)

Ironically, in view of the paragraph above, "Das Stahlitler" was conceived by the Nazis as an all-out propaganda film. They wanted to make a tribute to the upgraded efficiency of the German railroads, led up to by a general history of the invention and development of locomotives. The project was turned over to Willy Zieke, a superb documentarian director/photographer who was later created to be the useful prologue to Heini Riefenstahl's "Olympia". He was apparently given a free hand and a remarkably generous budget, allowing for the recreation of full-scale working models. When, after a lengthy production and editing process, the completed film was ready, the Nazis were greatly displeased. Far from boosting national pride, it gave far too much credit to the British - already earmarked as a potential enemy - and in addition was considered to be vaguely commissaristic, because of the cameraderie shown between railroad workers. Whether German audiences would have reacted to these subtitles will never be known, as the Nazis decided to ban the film from release and sent Zieke into an asylum, thus nipping in the bud a career that might have been made with this film. (On ultimate release, he did go back to making documentaries and industrials, but the momentum had been interrupted). Riefenstahl was also anxious not to have the film shown, since it made Zieke too much of a competitor in a field of film-making that was pretty exclusively hers by that time.

It's a stunning achievement in documentary, its cutting and imagery making it almost surreal at times. Like so many German films from "Metropolis" on, it is fascinated with machinery and the opportunity it offers for fluidity in camera mobility and editing. The imagery is so dynamic that continuity hardly matters, but such plot as it has concerns a designer/engineer (the film's only star), played by Arbenz Meg, who leads the team that builds "Express steam locomotives" researching the history of locomotives. Dialogue, which is minimal, is mainly important in pin-pointing the dates and events (more important to railroad buffs, who knew it all anyway) though occasionally there are some interesting moments in which the poetry of language matches that of image. Particularly interesting is one scene in which the engineer likens the locomotive to the human body, oil being equated with blood, the engine with the heart, etc. Obvously, with a knowledge of German the film will seem even better, but even without it (and clearly this is not the kind of film that can be given a synopsis) the imagery is so exciting and generally self-explanatory that you'll have no trouble following it.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

DIE REISE NACH BILSITZ (THE TRIP TO TILSIT) (Teils, 1939) Written and directed by Velt Harlan, from the story of the same name by Hermann Sudermann; Camera: Bruno Mondi; Music, Hans Otto Borgmann; Berlin premiere, Nov.15 1939; English subtitles; 95 mins. approx.

With Fritz Van Doegen/Phillip Born (The Husband); Kristina Soderbaum (The Wife); Anna Dannmann (The Woman from the City); Joestom Pfaff (The Sea); Albert Fluereh (The Prince) and Charlotte Schultz, Ernst Legal, Eduard von Winterstein, Manni Zinner.

For a film that was unquestionably one of Germany's best from the late 30's - and was much praised at the time by the overseas press, which pointed to it as an example of a film that was maintaining German's reputation in film despite the damage done by the Nazis - "The Trip to Tilsit" is oddly ignored and forgotten today. Only David Stewart Hull afforded it any recognition in this country, and all of the German film books - serious and nostalgic alike, including reproductions of fan magazines and souvenir programs - pointedly ignore it. One reason might be the tarnished reputation of Velt Harlan; writers have a habit of ignoring films that disturb or disagree with neatly formulated theories and careers that have been wrapped and sealed.

Harlan of course became notorious for his "Jew Suss", although it was the vicious performance of Werner Krauss that did most of the damage. Despite its anti-semitic bias, "Jew Suss", as a film, was a good one. Harlan himself was probably not anti-semitic, but he was certainly an opportunist and prone to flog with the tide. Had the demand been for a pre-Communist film, he'd have
delivered one of those with equal zeal. Mainly because of "Jew Suss" he went through a lengthy trial after the War, was officially acquitted, and (unlike Emil Jannings for example) allowed to return to film-work. He and his actress-wife Kristina Soderbaum returned to successful commercial film-making.

"The Trip to Tilsit", apart from being an extremely good film on its own, was two major academic interests - as one of the best films of Harlan, and as a kind of remake of Murnau's "Sunrise", the 1927 American classic. Actually it is not so much of a remake as an alternate version of Soderman's story, though it is closer to "Sunrise" (and shares the same ending, though with a different perspective) than to the original. Comparison between the two is rather pointless; "Sunrise" was and is a classic, the epitome of what the silent film could do at its zenith. But it was also a wholly stylized film, both in design and acting, a timeless film not locked in to any period.

Veit's film is basically more realistic, and is rather more locked in to its period. There are liabilities and assets for both versions. The sound version for example is more realistic, not least because it uses actual locations far more and because its acting is less stylised. But the lack of stylisation of the acting, and the more honest dialogue given to him, makes the role of the hero (if one can call him that), George O'Brien in the silent version and Phillip Dorn here, far less sympathetic. In fact, one wonders why either woman bothers with him in the sound version.

In 1963, Veit commented: "I was a friend of Murnau when he was in Germany, and of course saw "Sunrise" later when it came out. But I didn't see it again before I made my film. Murnau made his whole film into a piece of scenery, all in the studio. I did my version in Memel, where the story takes place. Murnau's "Sunrise" was a poem, but if you'll excuse me, mine was a real film."

Beautifully photographed and an amazingly polished production for its economy-conscious budget (about $140,000) survives really well, and deserves far wider re-exhibition than it is ever likely to get. It is entirely non-political, save (possibly) for the references to the seductive Woman from the City as being Polish. (This was, after all, after the invasion of Poland and the destruction of Warsaw: Harlan may have allowed the line as a weak and almost hidden propagandist sop to the Nazis, as a way of preventing further and more obvious propagandist content from being insisted on by the Nazi supervisors of the industry). It's interesting that both Murnau and Harlan saw fit to change (slightly) the original ending. One can't help but recall John Barrymore's contemptuous reference in "20th Century" -- "Soderman, that German huck!" -- and feel that their decision was the right one. (One can't discuss it without giving away key plot material, but this can be taken up in the post-screening discussion). Quite coincidentally, the print -- which was titled in English in Germany -- makes the hilarious faux-pas of translating Soderman's credit as author into "Distributed by Hermann Soderman"!

While Harlan obviously wasn't copying the Murnau film, he clearly kept it in mind, frequently deliberately (or seemingly so) shooting the scenes in a different way. And if the husband is more of a devil in this version, then the wife is correspondingly more humane and even more sympathetic than Margaret Livingston had been in the silent film. "Sunrise" isn't a difficult film to see (though silent, it had a musical track) and is one of the most joyous and beautiful films ever made ... if you haven't seen it, your movie life is woefully incomplete, and do watch for it the next time around.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10:35, followed by discussion session.

A reminder: Next week's program will be preceded by a jazz concert. It shouldn't delay us unduly, but it does mean that there will be no access to the auditorium until about 7:25.

As a post-script to the notes for "The Trip to Tilsit", it is worth noting that this was Fritz van Dongen's last German film. Henry Koster managed to get him to Hollywood, where he was soon established as a romantic star in the Paul Henrie tradition, his first American films including the anti-Nazi "Escape" and "Underground".