

MYTHOS EX MACHINA: MOTOR SPORT AS AN ICON OF MODERNITY IN THE POPULAR CULTURE OF NAZI GERMANY

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Up to now there have been few attempts to look at motor sport in Nazi Germany from the angle of the contemporary mass culture and mass media in the Third Reich. This is surprising because on the one hand Jeffrey Herf's studies about "Reactionary Modernism" have led to a new paradigm, in which the historical evaluations of fascist Germany emphasize the Nazi enthusiasm about modern technologies and their engagement for a progressive public life style with high standards of cultural consumption and modern mass culture. This was directly influenced by the cultural model USA, but also tightly connected to reactionary folkloristic, cultural, and ideological values or traditional strains of ideology like "blood and soil" or pride about home and nation in the romantic and racist terms of *Heimatverbundenheit*, *Volk*, or *Deutschtum*. On the other hand, in the last ten years motorcar racing has been remarkably successful in the mass media, particularly as a result of the popularity of the formula-one stars like Michael Schumacher or the attraction of the competition between Ferrari cars and the so-called "Silver Arrows" of Mercedes-Benz. Especially in Germany, the upswing of Formula One racing has revitalized memories of the "glorious era" of the Silver Arrows in the 1930s and the German racing stars of that period like Bernd Rosemeyer, Rudolf Caracciola, and Hans Stuck.

However, most of the illustrated books and documentary films today ignore the connections to the Nazi regime and the function of the motorcar racing as an instrument of propaganda and an effective event of popular culture and mass entertainment. The cult of motor sport as something constructed in and by the media in the mid-1930's, can open a historical window into the inner life of mass culture in Nazi Germany for us. It shows the divided mentality of the German people, which Hans-Dieter Schäfer called *Gespaltenes Bewußtsein*^I (split consciousness). This means a kind of multiple existence caught in the tension between the daily ideological requirements of the regime, people's own national yearnings and their individual desires for a life in privacy and personal happiness. It refers to an existence between technological progress, popular heroism, cultural consumption, modern life, mass motorization and again reactionary attitudes, uniformed Nazi aesthetic and its permanent acclamation of pre-modern elements.

The images of the victorious racing drivers and triumphant German technology came together to form a powerful mental construct that reinforced national self-confidence. Bernd Rosemeyer or Rudolf Caracciola, the drivers from the German automotive companies Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz, became modern masculine heroes. Behind the steering wheels of fast and powerful machines, they represented a strong, modern, and capable industrial nation, which – in the discourse of the time – as an organically grown and socially classless community of German workers (*Volkgemeinschaft*,

Werkmänner) never lost its roots to tradition, history and the virtues of workmanship and handmade, high-quality-products (*Deutsche Wertarbeit*). The “motor battles” (*Motorenschlachten*) at the Avus in Berlin and the Nürburgring were more popular than the usual mass party rallies of the Nazis in Nuremberg or other cities. In comparison to the stiff rituals there, the marching uniformed, disciplined bodies and the ideologically unequivocal acclamation of the total hegemony of one party, car races were a demonstration of the joy of life. They manifested the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* as a national community of joy and fun. Motor sport as a mass media construct moreover shows the effective strategy of the Nazis and the significance of modernity.

Sound film was the most effective mass medium to present the dynamics of racing sport. International races and trials in setting up new speed records already belonged to the standard topics in the newsreels of the Weimar republic. In the Third Reich, German drivers drove their foreign rivals from the pole position and the screens. Now the *Wochenschau* and *Kulturfilm* presented the triumphs of German drivers over Italian, French, or American fighters as a success story. The films were produced to proclaim the powerful “New Reality”² and the rise of motor sport under the NSKK (*Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrkorps*), the Nazi motor organization. Furthermore, these films supported the mass motorization propaganda of the *Volkswagen* and the construction of the new motorways, the *Reichsautobahn*.

While in the reality of the Third Reich mass motorization was out of question, the documentary shorts and features (*Kulturfilme*) that were produced showed an automotive wave rolling towards the cinema audience. Like no other medium, the movies were able to turn the propaganda of mass mobility as well as the popular desires of the viewers for tempo, spatial and mental freedom, and national edification into a virtual experience. In the cinema, the car, the power of the Silver-Arrows, and the motorized life style could become part of this virtual reality. The *Kulturfilm* transformed the rapidity of motor sport into an agile audiovisual speech and film structure, which ranked virtual experience and visual attractions far over the ideological loading of the film text. The screen as a dispositive of perception suggested speed, potency, and strength through the imaginary goggles of the racing driver. Therefore film analysis must be directed to the topics of modern life because the films presented the “society of the spectacle”³ in the same way as they mobilized individual and collective fantasies of acceleration, infinity, and dynamism. Simultaneously they pleased the popular fascination for modern technologies, tourism, and adventures in connection with ideologies close to Nazism like the sense of duty, discipline, toughness, or typically “German” or “Prussian” virtues.

The length of the *Kulturfilme* ranged between 15 and 90 minutes. They were produced by the NSKK in cooperation with the automotive industry and other Nazi organizations or institutions like the SS, the military, or police forces (*Wehrmacht*). The films were titled *Deutscher Kraftfahrtsport voran!* (1935), *Deutsche Rennwagen in Front* (1938), *Sieg auf der ganzen Linie* (1939), and *Sieg der Arbeit* (1940). Parallel to the official productions, Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz ordered their own films, in which esthetical elements from several genres of documentary and promotion films were amalgamated. In *Sieg – Rekord – Meisterschaft* (1940) Mercedes stylized its team and racing cars into unbeatable representatives of unsurpassable German precision work.

The main titles are significant for the film’s major themes: national superiority, technical power-fantasies, and acceleration make up the center of the film text. The motor

sport films of Nazi Germany came astonishingly close to the esthetic concepts of the Italian and Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s. They were influenced by the dynamism of the Italian futurists and by the genuine cinema, the “cinema of attraction”⁴ in the theoretical understanding of the Soviet avant-garde. Eisenstein viewed the cinema in relation to the fairground amusement parks. Thus the film audience should be given the elemental feeling of sitting in a roller coaster. Film montage should be an instrument to stimulate the audience, to charge it psycho-energetically and to impress it psychologically. Dziga Vertov raved about the possibilities of the “mechanical eye” that grasps an modern accelerated world of living through different perspectives and the continuous motion of the film operator and his camera, which has to hurry from extreme low to extreme high perspectives.

The Nazi motor sport films carry on with these concepts: The cinema became a driving simulator for an audience that previously had been immobile. Now movies could present the experience of virtual mobility:

*When he sits behind the wheel and then the compressor is roaring and the thundering sound of the engine bounce against the walls of the rock face. [...] I honestly believed I myself was sitting in this racing car. It was so near, so reachable, when the trees passed by. [...] How these guys filmed the Freiburger mountain record, so compressed, as if you are at all places and at same time in the back of the car, too. That is magnificent. I was totally excited.*⁵

The *Filmkurier* praised the dynamics of the filmic synesthesia:

*Mighty motor battles are raging here, and over and over again it's a triumph for the genial constructions of German technicians and engineers. Out of the roaring of compressors and the screaming of the brakes sounds the hymn of the racing driver. [...] The film is brilliantly made, it has a fascinating tempo.*⁶

The rapid editing of these reels broke with the official ideal of the *Kulturfilm* as an educational medium and a sublime film format, which should keep to the high culture demands of teachers and the well-educated middle classes. Films like *Deutsche Rennwagen in Front* placed national edification and the “Cult of Distraction” that Kracauer⁷ had described above the cultivation of the audience or esoteric building. The films aimed less at simply distributing Nazi platitudes or high culture than at imparting a medially entertaining world-view, which at the same time was unmistakably coded with the symbols of National Socialism. However, it was primarily just nationalistic and thus offered a wide range of the ideological address of the mass audience.

One expressive example for the mixture of traditional *Kulturfilm* genres like the ethnographic documentary or tourist and landscape film is the movie *Deutsche Siege in drei Erdteilen*, produced by Auto Union in 1938. Wolfgang Staudte was in charge of post-production.⁸ Rather than using the usual chronological arrangement of the films, the script of *Deutsche Siege in drei Erdteilen* sketched a narrative structure, in which the Auto Union team is stylized to a German pioneer troop of motorization. The racing season is turned into not only a global expedition, but also a worldwide campaign to conquer virtual countries, symbolized through the trophies of triumph. And like a feature movies, this promotion film presented stars like the German idol Bernd Rosemeyer and his wife Elly Beinhorn, a popular aviatrix. They were used as popular attractions

just like the luxurious cars that were placed in the film cosmos of the Italian “Forum Mussolini” or the “modern” colony Libya. The film text alternates between filmic sight-seeing, ethnographic expeditions, and a tourist excursion, in which the cadre becomes a space for product placement. The film transformed the screen into a car’s windscreen. The film gives the spectator the point of view of a virtual tourist, a civilized European, who becomes acquainted with foreign countries, people, and exotic sceneries. From the virtual front passenger seat he could enjoy a filmic anticipation of the coming mass motorization, which the “Führer” had promised.

- ¹ H. D. Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein: über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit, 1933-1945* (München: Hanser, 1982).
- ² W. Uricchio, “The Past as Prologue? The ‘Kulturfilm’ before 1945,” in H. B. Heller, P. Zimmermann (eds.), *Blicke in die Welt* (Konstanz: UVK Universitätsverlag, 1995), pp. 263-288.
- ³ G. Debord, *Die Gesellschaft des Spektakels* [1967] (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 1996).
- ⁴ T. Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in A. Arker, Th. Elsaesser (eds.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 59-62.
- ⁵ *Allgemeine Automobil-Zeitung*, vol. 34, no. 1 (7 January 1933), p. 33.
- ⁶ *Filmkurier*, 18 February 1939.
- ⁷ S. Kracauer, *Die Angestellten: aus dem neuesten Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971).
- ⁸ E. Orbanz, *Wolfgang Staudte* (Berlin: Spiess, 1977).