

SELECTED BY: IRMBERT SCHENK

PETER ZIMMERMANN (ED.), *GESCHICHTE DES DOKUMENTARISCHEN FILMS IN DEUTSCHLAND*, 3 VOLL., RECLAM, STUTTGART 2005

Vol. 1: Uli Jung, Martin Loiperdinger (eds.), *Kaiserreich, 1895-1918*

Vol. 2: Klaus Kreimeier, Antje Ehrmann, Jeanpaul Goergen (eds.), *Weimarer Republik, 1918-1933*

Vol. 3: Peter Zimmermann, Kay Hoffmann (eds.), *Drittes Reich, 1933-1945*

The edition of *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, edited by Peter Zimmermann on behalf of the Haus des Dokumentarfilms in Stuttgart, is one of the most significant achievements in German publishing in the field of film history. This can be said even in the international context, as it is difficult to think of any other country whose history of documentary film has been explored as thoroughly as in this case. The edition comprises three volumes with 2.000 pages altogether and has emanated from a DFG-raised research project of the universities of Siegen and Trier and the Haus des Dokumentarfilms, which were practically cooperating with the German Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin. A total of 45 authors worked on the three volumes, the particular editors being the main contributors. The division into three volumes corresponds to political caesurae: 1895-1918, 1918-1933, 1933-1945. It is the editors' explicit intention to work with a broad determination of what documentary film is, and to illustrate its evolution by transcending the borders of film history towards media-historical and cultural-historical contexts. Astonishingly, both aims are followed to a great extent, although the individual volumes differ considerably in methodology and contexts.

For example, already in its introduction the first volume (1895-1918) reveals a predominantly film- and media-historical approach and

a highly factographical argumentation. This leads to the statement that the term "documentary film" cannot be used for the period before 1918 and "non-fictional" should be applied instead. Adequately, the introduction argues that hitherto existing ideas about early film are incorrect, as they derive from a teleology that draws its terminology for the years before the end of World War I from later and "very different" periods in the development of the medium. This statement is questionable both from a historical and a theoretical point of view but, on the other hand, the advantages of such a tightly corded argumentation are obvious: the reader is allowed to access an impressive amount of detailed information on the development of documentary film in the period under examination (which is subdivided according to the emergence of different places of presentation, such as mobile cinema and cinematographical theatres). The text offers an extensive display of the current state of research, an overview of the medium's technical and economical history, and an exemplary examination of some documentary "genres" and their programme schedules in cinema. At this point, the most important distinctive feature is the transition from the cinema of showing, the views of the "cinema of attractions," to the development of the genres of documentary film and the emergence of feature film around 1911/12. The final chapter of this volume presents a detailed description of film policy (that also provided the basis of the development of feature film) and documentary film work during World War I.

Volumes 2 and 3 focus on a general historical contextualization of film history in the discussion of the modern age and the modernization of society in particular periods. This principle of argumentation, made explicit in the opening chapters, is followed by most of the other authors, too. This fact attests to the editors' outstanding ability to coordinate the various contributions, and to a certain extent, the same can also be said for volume 1. A large part of volume 2 (1918-1933) is dedicated to the exami-

nation of the special documentary phenomenon of the Weimar Republic, the *Kulturfilm*, its institutional establishment and division into numerous genres that range from urban film to animal and wildlife documentaries, expedition films, mission and artist films. The theoretical debates of the Weimar age, such as the ones regarding censorship or educational film, are portrayed adequately. The distinction between *Kulturfilm* and documentary film may have a heuristic cause, for *Kulturfilm* was attached to a broader field of subjects, and “documentary film” is examined here in the form of newsreel, advertising film, industrial film and architecture film. One chapter is devoted to “border-crossing” personalities – Walter Ruttmann, Wilfried Basse, Heinrich Hauser and Arnold Fanck are filed under this label. Leftist film work in the Weimar Republic, cross-section film and the relations of documentary film with avant-garde are also examined in their own right. The final chapter deals with the function of documentary black and white film images from the 1920s as they are being used in colour television documentaries of today – a topic that is explored in even greater detail at the end of volume 3, where it is examined with reference to the formation of present views of Third Reich history via the use of contemporary documentary material in numerous television documentaries.

Being the thickest of the three books, volume 3 (1933-1945) takes to a further level the principle of contextualization beyond film and media history. Different phases of the process through which the historians came to terms with the Third Reich after 1945 are surveyed. Some of the main criteria include the perception of modernization and the critical analysis of long-standing popular totalitarianism theories as well as the inclusion of social history and the history of everyday life respectively. This exploration then leads to a very critical discussion of film-historical literature on the Third Reich, which – in Germany – is still mainly bound to the scheme of totalitarianism and a corresponding understanding of propaganda. It also contains a plea for a more

nuanced analysis of the continuity of film production from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich, allowing it to obtain a certain discreteness and ambiguity towards the demands of the state and the governing party. Film politics, institutionalization and censorship are depicted in a separate chapter, followed by an examination of individual genres of *Kulturfilm* and newsreels of the 1930s (with the latter also being an experimental ground for innovations in the field of film technology). One chapter is dedicated to the documentary depictions of industrial modernization, starting with Ruttmann through industrial and advertising film, films on motorsports and *Autobahn* to the inception of television during the Olympic Games of 1936. With numerous other genres being examined, it is true for all of them that the argumentation focuses on the connection between backward-looking blood and soil ideology and the modernization fraction that make up the overall picture of Nazi propaganda. This also applies in a narrow sense to the Nazi propaganda films, which are dealt with separately. The examination of the function of these films during the war and of wartime newsreels completes the impressive range of topics in this volume.

All the volumes are equipped with large bibliographies and lists of films (3700 titles altogether, multiple mentions included), with the film indices fortunately containing up-to-date archival reference. Additionally, the last volume provides 90 short biographies of selected filmmakers. A filmographic database is available via the website of the Haus des Dokumentarfilms, www.hdf.de.

Alas, the editors' wish for a continuation of the project in the form of annotated DVD editions of as many films as possible remains unfulfilled for financial reasons. This idea would also have satisfied the needs of many film historians who encounter severe problems when trying to have access to these films, many of which are either rare or in a bad state. But hope springs eternal... More realistic, however, is the hope for a sequel to *Geschichte des doku-*

mentarischen Films in Deutschland, whose effort for German film historiography cannot be overestimated, for the period after 1945. The reading of this epochal approach is a must for

everybody concerned with German film history, and this does not exclusively mean the history of documentary film, but German film history in general.