
Peter Jelavich. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Radio, Film, and the Death of Weimar Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 300p.

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In his new book, Peter Jelavich sets out to show that the avant-garde culture of the Weimar Republic was largely defunct by the end of 1931, having fallen victim to a culture of fear that had gripped the country ever since the previous autumn. To readers versed in the extant scholarship on the Weimar Republic, this is a familiar and “disheartening” tale of the spirit of artistic experimentation, social progress, and democratic pluralism heading towards its demise in the final years of the republic before being officially criminalized, persecuted, and vanquished by the National Socialist dictatorship. Jelavich’s study adds a further, compelling piece to this picture by illuminating the issue of censorship and its modes of application in radio and film, two of the most vehemently contested modern technologies of the time. Film was the only privately owned medium subjected to preemptive censorship in the Weimar era, while radio was a state monopoly governed by political oversight boards. By the end of the 1920s, the negotiations between the various interested parties involved in the process had established parameters that, by and large, allowed for a wide range of artistic and political expression. Following the worldwide depression that commenced in October 1929, the National Socialist Workers’ Party leaped onto the national stage by garnering 18% of the votes cast in the parliamentary elections of September 1930. During the winter of 1930 and the spring of 1931, the Nazis unleashed a well-organized and multi-pronged attack, at times physical, on administrators, producers, artists, and audiences, resulting in a “fear psychosis.” At a time when Hitler’s political future was far from certain, many radio station managers and film producers responded by preemptively depoliticizing their output claiming that the general public desired entertaining “distractions,” not challenging, socially engaged works.

Focusing on a particular and highly significant case, three versions of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Jelavich outlines a “cautionary tale” about the pernicious effects of such a culture of fear on artistic production (xii). By explicating the multiplicity of aesthetic, technological, political, and commercial forces that affected the production and reception of the novel (1929), the radio play (September 1930), and the sound film (October 1931), the author seeks to shed light on the processes that led to the death of Weimar culture in general. Döblin’s modernist novel is widely seen as one of the pinnacles of innovation in Weimar literature, primarily for its montage-like narrative structure, its parodic thrust and its radically anti-humanist

ethos that positions the subject as an entity constituted, or written, by the mass-cultural profusion of language and media in a metropolitan environment. Perhaps because the scholarship on Döblin's novel is already extensive, Jelavich accords more space to his discussion of radio and film. In a strategy of contextualization, each chapter moves from the general to the specific outlining the earlier histories of these media and the debates and institutional developments leading up to the time of the intermedial adaptations of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Particularly informative is the author's treatment of the bureaucratic structures and challenges facing those persons responsible for setting up the new media while confronted with considerable public scrutiny and divergent demands from political pressure groups. While radio programming remained mainly in the hands of middle-class (*bildungsbürgerlich*) proponents of high-cultural fare, and ways of institutionalizing public input were never realized in the Weimar Republic, audiences were also able to observe the development of new genres for the radio, such as the "acoustic picture," the "acoustic sequence," and finally the radio play. As Jelavich emphasizes, this process featured some of the most innovative artists from the areas of literature, theater, and film. The transformation of the sprawling novel into a radio play required a massive compression of the work. Although lacking several of the defining and politically provocative themes of the novel, as for example homosexuality, the radio play, retitled as *The Story of Franz Biberkopf*, was cancelled by the political oversight committee at the last minute. Jelavich's analysis of this surprising decision, which included the vote of the Social Democrat parliamentarian Ernst Heilmann, reveals that the committee had likely acted out of fear of further stoking the inflamed political climate.

As concerns film, Jelavich demonstrates how preemptive censorship was maintained by the Reichstag due to the cinema's perceived capability to influence audiences. The guidelines passed by the Reichstag were designed to proscribe works that disrupted public order, offended religious sentiments, encouraged violence or immorality, or harmed Germany's international prestige. Two film review boards, in Munich and in Berlin, were entrusted with the task of previewing films and implementing the governmental guidelines, while a national appellate board was put in place to hear the most contentious cases. Up until the time of the depression, these boards tended to limit only a few controversial issues, notably abortion and gay rights, from being depicted on the screen. As in the case of radio, Jelavich shows how the right gradually succeeded in tilting the public discourse about acceptable and unacceptable material in its favor, by claiming that films with nationalist, monarchist, or militarist agendas be deemed "apolitical" while films with a progressive social agenda or even with a pro-democratic outlook be labeled "political" and "tendentious." As Nazi sympathizers staged massive demonstrations against the Hollywood produc-

tion of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in December 1930, the appellate board gave in to pressure from conservative forces and from the rioters and barred the film. This marked a turning point, not only because it was the first incident of a federal institution succumbing to right-wing intimidation, but also because it represented the beginning of swift censorial action on a broad scale against leftist art. Theater operators and film producers increasingly fell in line and distanced themselves from any themes that might meet with an uncertain fate in the oversight process. The film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* also differed substantially from the novel, mainly due to a decision to shoot a “realistic” film in terms of characterization, narrative, and scenery. The tensions and ruptures within the film showed the multiplicity of contending and often contradictory forces that impinged on cinema at the time, leading Jelavich to assert that Phil Jutzi’s film may aptly serve “as a palimpsest of the dying Republic” (xvi).

A further aspect of Jelavich’s project is constituted by biographies. Döblin’s life and work serve as the common thread, but the author also provides insight into the roles played by other key individuals involved in the conception and the production of the three versions of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The imposing actor Heinrich George, for example, came to determine the characterization of Franz Biberkopf in a manner that reflected his well-known and entrenched screen persona and that ran counter to the anti-psychological notion of subjectivity mapped out in the novel. The study concludes with a brief account of the conversion of radio and film into instruments of the Third Reich and the Nazis’ vengeful persecution of important figures of Weimar broadcasting and film, including the murder of Ernst Heilmann in 1940 in the Buchenwald concentration camp.

While characterized by very few indications as to method and sparing reference to the work of other historians on the period, Jelavich’s study stands on firm documentary footing. The author has meticulously examined a wide range of sources, among them transcripts of parliamentary debates and oversight board meetings, daily newspapers, industry publications, and specialized publications related to radio and film, as well as the script and the recording of *The Story of Franz Biberkopf* and the screenplay and the resulting film *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Jelavich offers a highly detailed and highly readable blend of historical and cultural scholarship, articulated in the framework of a far-reaching case study. His book will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of censorship in the disintegrating Weimar Republic. ✱