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Privat-Vorstellung: Heimkino in Deutschland vor 1945

MARTINA ROEPKE

Hildesheim, Olms, 2006

236 pp., illus., €24.80 (pbk)

In 1903, the Ernemann company introduced its *Kino*, the first apparatus for recording and projecting film aimed at the private market in Germany. Besides the camera and the accompanying 17.5-mm film stock, Ernemann also offered a small collection of films that could be bought and screened in private homes. The wealthy bourgeois citizens that could afford this equipment could choose between travelogues, military parades, city views, expedition films, humorist sketches, magic trick films, scientific films and so-called 'gentlemen's films' (p. 45). And even though Ernemann's distribution experiment was short-lived (it ended in 1908), the screening of professional productions in the private home continued, as in the mid-1930s when the film programmes combined self-made amateur films with cultural films, newsreels and even feature films.

In her book *Private Screening: home cinema in Germany before 1945*, Martina Roepke investigates the introduction and development of films made and screened by German amateurs before the end of the Second World War. Her discussion of Ernemann's home cinema shows that the screening of professional film in the private home started much earlier than the introduction of Pathé Baby 9,5 mm film in the 1920s—be it still in a rudimentary and experimental form. However, in spite of what the title suggests, the main focus of the book is not on private screenings, but rather on amateur film production. Roepke studied a corpus of about 450 amateur films from the period 1916–1952, collected at the end of the 1970s by the *Süddeutsche Rundfunk* (Stuttgart) for a television programme about the 'Third Reich'. The programme makers were collecting these films in the hope to find traces of the presence of national-socialism in the daily lives of Germans. However, they concluded that these amateur film-makers captured the same themes as before the Nazi Regime: children, the private home, holidays in the mountains or at the sea (p. 16). With a detailed analysis of several films, and of the handbooks, amateur film journals and equipment instruction booklets that aided the home movie maker, Roepke convincingly argues that far from offering the naïve, supposedly unmediated view on reality that the programme makers hoped to find, home movies are highly constructed productions that incorporate both expectations on how amateur films should be made and the acts and negotiations of the family members involved in the making.

The book offers a model for systematically analysing the aesthetics, content and context of home movies. The model departs from Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic approach, developed in his *Le Film de famille: usage privé, usage public* (1995), which aims to identify the factors—both in the film text and outside of it—that determine how a viewer recognises these films as belonging to the specific genre of the family film. Most scholars of home movies use this approach to relate the genre to a specific function, such as documents within a historical discourse, the celebration and commemoration of communion between family members, or as family rituals. By contrast, Roepke argues for a praxis-based approach to acknowledge the fact that in the first half of the century the role of film in the context of the private home was not yet so clearly delineated as it now seems. Her model presents home movies as the result of a complex process of negotiations between the different family members and friends involved in the making of the film. In this process, expectations about form, style and exhibition as created by the discourse in handbooks and film journals, as anticipated responses to the film during its future screening, blend with the behaviour of the participants during the making of the film.

Where Roepke firmly bases her model in the praxis of home movie making, in the analysis of the films she eventually focuses on the resulting film text, with its particular aesthetics and character performances, rather than the social and historical context in which the films originate. This is advantageous, because many amateur films found on attics or in archives come without much information on the context in which they were made and then the film text is the only thing available to the researcher. In particular, Roepke's list of different characters, or figures—such as the assistant, the saboteur, the accomplice and the clown—provide useful tools to systematically analyse this specific type of media product.

At the same time, this approach diminishes the attention for the specific social and historical context in which the films originated. This is particularly striking since Roepke based her book on a very specific collection of films: home movies made in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Although in the preface she asks how these home movies succeeded in bridging the gap between small-scale happiness and the great catastrophe that was taking place at the time (p. 9), in her fourth chapter, where she analyses three films from that period, Roepke does not succeed in formulating a convincing answer. Although she notes that the films do confirm certain values promoted by the Nazi Regime—such as the central role of the mother as the carer of the family and by extension of the entire nation—because of the focus on home movies as the products of specific social groups she seems mainly concerned with downplaying the influence of ideological discourse on the films. Thus even in the analysis of a 1942 film of a family gathered in the air defence basement of their home, the emphasis is on the role of the technology and the way in which the ensemble constructs this specific situation *as film*.

The question remains whether the analysis of the multifaceted genre of home movies can do without information about the social and historical context in which these films were made. The fact that Roepke convincingly situates Ernemann's home cinema in the context of early cinema, with its programmes of short films, introduced by an explicator and alternated by theatrical and vaudeville performances, only underlines this point. It is in this analysis of home movies as a situated, social

phenomenon with strong ties to the context of the professional cinema that the book truly contributes to the field of media history.

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