
Rezensiert von: Gary D. Stark, Grand Valley State University

Recent scholarship on the profound political influence that the emergence of mass media and commercial entertainments had in late 19th and early 20th century Germany stress how, on the one hand, „[t]he expansion of the media […] promoted a more democratic political culture by opening access to matters of public interest,” and, on the other, „provided new and more powerful tools for the manipulation or ‘management’ of public opinion”.1 For the imperial period, most observers of the interactions between the media, public opinion, and the changing understanding of political leadership focus on the press and government press policy but don’t see cinema as an important medium for political communication until the First World War. Dominik Petzold’s insightful new study, however, clearly demonstrates that film was in fact used as a political vehicle since its invention in 1895. Kaiser Wilhelm II and his court purposefully employed this popular new medium for carefully staged „info-tainment” and „politainment” (to use modern terms) to popularize, legitimize and „charismatize” the monarchy in an age of mass democratization.

Although Wilhelm represented and staunchly defended pre-modern political, social, and aesthetic values, he was also an enthusiast for modern technology, including advances in photography. At his first viewing of a motion picture in 1896 he disliked its coarseness and flickering, but as the quality of cinematography improved, within two years he had become a cinema devotee. He watched cinema performances frequently (especially films of himself), had small cinema theaters constructed in the Neue Palais and Berliner Stadtschloss, and members of the nascent cinema industry soon regarded him as a fervent supporter and powerful promoter of their interests. Just as he prided himself on being the modern, forward-looking *Flottenkaiser*, he can legitimately also be called the *Kinokaiser*, for besides being a devoted film fan he was also unquestionably the most filmed person in imperial Germany and became its first and most popular „film star.” According to Petzold, at least 324 film recordings of him were made before 1914, most of which were shot at his frequent public appearances. Because of the early film industry’s structural peculiarities, the Kaiser appeared on film screens far more often than any other person of his era. His cinematic presence skyrocketed between 1912 and 1914, when shots of him became a staple of weekly newsreels. The Kaiser thereby achieved a visibility no other political figure or institution could hope to rival – indeed, German cinema audiences rarely, if ever, saw any public figure other than him. As film became a mass medium, it gave the monarchy a communications advantage over all other political institutions, groups, or actors.

Petzold has done meticulous research in film and government archives, contemporary printed sources, and scholarly publications, although he seems unaware of Corey Ross’ important book. He systematically examines the Kaiser’s relationship to and interactions with cinema from every conceivable angle: when, how, and by whom Wilhelm was filmed and how those decisions were made; how he and his court directed and orchestrated the work of several early cinematographers and gave a privileged few exclusive access to his private activities in the palace or on the royal yacht; how they avoided having him filmed in potentially problematic situations or later censored recordings they disapproved of; where, when, and to whom film recordings of the Kaiser were shown, and why; and why „Kaiser films” were especially well-suited to the early cinema and why audiences and the cinema industry found them fascinating, attractive, and lucrative. To answer questions like this last set, Petzold always looks to larger

social and cinematic contexts, explicating for readers such topics as the rise of popular culture, cinema’s role in an entertainment culture, the aesthetics and form of the cinematic point of view (Anblick), the ways film constructs rather than reproduces reality (with viewers always seeing less than the actual live event), the movements after 1910 to reform both cinema and pedagogy, and Social Democrats’ reaction to the regime’s film propaganda as well as their failure to recognize, much less utilize, the power of this new mass medium until after the First World War.

Petzold makes clear that Wilhelm was a very savvy media politician who quickly grasped that film offered new opportunities for rulers to project an image that communicated political dominance. Beginning around 1898, he and those around him, especially the Reichsmarineamt, skillfully encouraged, facilitated, and used film recordings of himself at numerous carefully staged public appearances and choreographed “private” moments with his family to project and represent monarchical authority and to shape public perceptions of power in ways that would legitimize and popularize the Wilhelminian regime. These early examples of pro-monarchical film propaganda were used and distributed by various officials, nationalistic associations such as the Navy League, in daily commercial cinema programs and newsreels, at patriotic celebrations, and in many German schools.

These findings are a significant contribution to our understanding of how symbolic behavior, ceremonial actions, costumes, images, symbols, and a general „theatricality” has been used to publicly project, communicate, mediate, and stage political domination (Vermittlung und Inszenierung von Herrschaft), especially by late-19th-century monarchies struggling for legitimacy in an age of mass democratization. It reaffirms and expands Christopher Clark’s recent argument in Kaiser Wilhelm II that Wilhelm’s peripatetic and grandiose „personal rule” – his frequent and highly choreographed public displays of imperial majesty to adoring audiences, his numerous, well-publicized speeches and trips, his ostentatious costumes and love of pomp and circumstance – was less a manifestation of his personal vanity than a strategic method of exercising and retaining power. He was a „media monarch” whose frequent contact with the public, being in the public eye, and projecting a majestic public image, was an effort to attune a pre-modern, anti-democratic institution to the modern, political mass market by personalizing and „charismatizing” it, by giving it a popular grounding. Petzold explicitly places the Kaiser within a long tradition of monarchical representation, but also credits him with introducing dramatically innovative, modern elements that utilized the rapidly emerging new culture of mass entertainment to strengthen his political rule. In doing so Wilhelm II helped inaugurate a central tendency of the 20th century, when film and television became the most influential media for political communication, image-shaping, and propaganda.

How effective was the Kaiser’s film propaganda, and how did Germans receive it? Petzold recognizes that audiences are not passive objects naively internalizing the „messages” broadcast to them; rather, they receive and actively select words and images in a complex, unpredictable manner, often imbuing them with their own meanings and appropriating them in surprising ways, and so he refrains from drawing unwarranted conclusions about these films’ impact. Instead, he carefully discusses the many factors that influenced how a cinemagoer in imperial Germany might interpret a film recording: the particular kind of space where the image was projected; the type of projection technology used; the age, class, and gender composition of the audience; the larger configuration of the „film program” of which particular shorter recordings were a part and the order in which the pieces were shown; and whether the recording was introduced by a speaker or accompanied by music or a narrator. Although he has found instances when some of these factors subverted a film’s intended pro-monarchy message and cites evidence of certain audiences expressing negative reactions to clips of the Kaiser, he concludes that by and large, these screenings had more of an „acclamatory” than a subversive character and

the „contributions” (that is, spontaneous expressions) of audiences, as well as of the narrators and musicians, strengthened the effect of the film. He goes even further: despite the fears of cultural conservatives that this new mass medium was undermining morality and the authority of established institutions, Petzold argues „that not only were the Kaiser films up on the cinema screen media well-suited for Herrschaftsinszenierung, but also that the institution of cinema was, as a rule, a place where system-affirming political conceptions were further strengthened, not undermined“ (p. 164, translated from German).

Rich with insights that cut across several disciplines, this book deserves the attention of scholars who are interested in the politics and culture of Wilhelmine Germany, the history of the cinema, and the „new“ political history that studies power through the paradigm of communication and the public sphere.