

Noack, Frank: *Veit Harlan. The Life and Work of a Nazi Filmmaker*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8131-6700-8; 452 S.

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As Frank Noack points out in his author's note to this extensive English-language biography of Harlan's filmmaking career, „Veit Harlan: The Life and Work of a Nazi Filmmaker“ is not simply a translation of his earlier, German-language book „Veit Harlan: Des Teufels Regisseur“.¹ If the latter book was written, as Noack puts it, „in protest against German film scholars who relied on outdated sources“ and as a „pro-Harlan polemic“ designed to answer „anti-Harlan polemics“ (p. vii), the newer book draws on a wider range of material, uses high-quality copies of Harlan films, and seeks to place discussion of Harlan's films within the context of the New Film History movement.

In fact, Noack's book is quite determinedly a book about Harlan's films, rather than about the political and moral debates which have raged around his person. Not that these are not discussed. They are, and always in a balanced way – including Harlan's alleged attack on Fritz Kortner with a riding whip in 1929 (p. 52), his interview with the „Völkischer Beobachter“ in 1933 (p. 67), the postwar trials launched against him, and his long-running dispute with Erich Lüth over the latter's call for a boycott of Harlan's film „Unsterbliche Geliebte“ (1951) (e.g. pp. 263–264). Noack also provides many sketches of Harlan's acquaintances, friends and colleagues in the film world: his book is full of colourful and telling vignettes. But by and large, Noack shapes each of his chapters around Harlan's films, although the early chapters also give a fascinating insight into his career as a theatre actor and theatre director particularly in the 1920s. The subtitle of his book, „The Life and Work of a Nazi Filmmaker“, is somewhat misleading, as Noack's readings of Harlan's films, including those produced under Nazism, emphasise their ambivalence, and film scholars will benefit enormously from his considered analyses. Rather than read-

ing Harlan's films as political statements or even understanding them in terms of whether or not they adopt political positions, Noack reads them as artistic compositions. Not that Noack is not interested in political contexts, and his filmic discussions do take account of them, as his discussions of the enormously successful „Die Goldene Stadt“ (1942) and the bombastic „Kolberg“ (1945) demonstrate (see pp. 199–206 and pp. 241–248). But he is just as interested, if not more, in film-historical contexts. A good example is his exploration of „Hanna Amon“ (1951) from the perspective of the „Heimattfilm“ genre (pp. 295–296). Equally, the author draws out the characteristics of Harlan's film oeuvre as a whole, such as the androgynous nature of some of his film characters, moments of sadism, rebellion or sacrifice. He also explores the persistent use of certain filmic techniques, such as dissolves, and of symbolic motifs, such as Harlan's use of globes (e.g. pp. 316–317). Noack's book is notable for seeking to understand Harlan's films in terms of their aesthetics, their relationship to one another, and to contemporary trends in filmmaking.

For all his focus on Harlan's films, the author does address the question of Harlan's relationship to National Socialism, if not in a sustained or systematic way. Here too, his tone and opinions are measured and careful. What emerges from his biography is an image of a man driven by ambition, not by ideology. Writing of Harlan in 1930, Noack describes him „as a radical individual“ who „did not want a bigger Germany“ but just wanted „bigger parts“ (p. 56). Harlan paid „lip service to National Socialism“, but „despite a certain affinity to nationalism, he was definitely not a warmonger“ (p. 74). But a quality Harlan shared in common with Goebbels, was „megalomania“ (p. 239). Discussing Harlan's films „Jud Süß“ (1940) and „Anders als du und ich“ (1957), Noack comes to the conclusion that Harlan was „the messenger attacked for a message others had initiated“: „he was neither an anti-Semite nor a homophobe, but he shared some of society's prejudices against Jews and gays and as an artist used those prejudices to achieve cer-

¹ Frank Noack, Veit Harlan. Des Teufels Regisseur, Munich 2000.

tain dramatic effects“ (p. 334). „Jud Süß“ notwithstanding, there is certainly plenty of evidence that would appear to indicate Harlan was not anti-Semitic. His first wife, after all, was Dora Gerson – a German-Jewish singer and actress who was later murdered in Auschwitz. A thread that runs throughout Noack’s book is Harlan’s friendship with Julius Bab, the famous German theatre critic and cofounder of the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden who remained close to Harlan despite „Jud Süß“, and supported him after the war. In defending his own conduct under Nazism to the British in 1945, Harlan was able to point to situations where, numerous times, he had helped out Jews working in the film industry, or those who were married to Jews.² Noack informs us, too, that whoever was responsible for initiating the „Merchant of Venice“ film project in 1944, there is evidence that Harlan together with Hans Reisiger tried to sabotage it (p. 283). And Noack, while stressing Harlan’s commitment to the „Jud Süß“ project – „why travel to Poland [to do some research] when even Goebbels and the script did not demand it“ (p. 165) – provides a nuanced reading of the film which draws attention to its more complex moments. Thus rather than focusing only on the four, well-known and clearly anti-Semitic dissolves in „Jud Süß“, Noack identifies twelve dissolves throughout the film, some of which are more ambiguous (pp. 181–182).

Unlike Ingrid Buchloh, who in her recent book on Harlan portrayed Harlan as vigorously opposed to antisemitism, Noack concedes that Harlan might occasionally have allowed himself to be influenced by it (p. 53).³ But essentially, neither he nor Buchloh see Harlan as tainted by antisemitism. In this, I believe they are both wrong. Harlan certainly thought like an anti-Semite. In an unpublished essay from around 1950, Harlan excoriates emigres and above all the Jews for what he sees as their pernicious influence on postwar Germany. „Ungebührlich vordrängerlich füllen die Immigrierten Büros, Bühne, Film und Presse. Deutsche Millionen versickern im israelischen Wüstensand [...] Die Morgenröte des Auferstehungstages liegt über der dürstenden Erde. Die Juden haben wieder ihre Häuser und Geschäfte“.

Harlan clearly felt he was the object of a Jewish conspiracy to topple him after the war. Lamenting the denial to him, as he saw it, of his democratic rights, he wrote: „Diese demokratische Freiheit gilt dann nicht, wenn es den Juden so gefällt. Also eine Minderheit von 60.000 Menschen will in Deutschland ein 60-Millionen-Volk geistig vergewaltigen“.⁴ In the light of such comments, Harlan’s graphic depiction of rape and torture in „Jud Süß“ seems less a response to Goebbels’ wish for a scene reminiscent of „Tosca“ (or „Othello“), and more an expression of Harlan’s own neurosis about Jews. In a letter to Captain Philipps in 1945, Harlan blamed his „Jewish colleagues after emigration to foreign countries“ of having put him on a „black list“ – without any concrete evidence that Jews were involved in this at all.⁵ Harlan’s Nachlass shows him to be a dab hand at Jewish caricatures.⁶ Having Jewish friends during the Third Reich, working with and protecting threatened Jews (which certainly required courage) does not automatically grant exemption from the charge of antisemitism. When, after the end of the war, Harlan found himself in a democratic society where people were free to express opinions again, he was quick to understand criticism of his person as a conspiracy and frame this conspiracy in anti-Semitic terms (though not in public). This was exactly the message, namely that there is a Jewish conspiracy to exercise control over gentiles, which ran through his film „Jud Süß“.

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² Filmarchiv Düsseldorf, Nachlass Veit Harlan 3: FM SLG. VH-119.

³ Ingrid Buchloh, *Veit Harlan. Goebbels’ Starregisseur*, Paderborn 2010.

⁴ Filmmuseum Potsdam, Nachlass Veit Harlan DL/N109 30–39, Schriftgut (verschiedenes): Aufsätze Veit Harlan, „Menschen – Tiere – Sensationchen“, no date (probably 1950–1951)

⁵ Filmarchiv Düsseldorf, Nachlass Veit Harlan 3: FM SLG. VH-119, Veit Harlan, „My Attitude Towards National Socialism“, no date (probably July 1945).

⁶ See, for instance, the caricatures in Filmarchiv Düsseldorf, Nachlass Veit Harlan 3: FM SLG. VH-119, Veit Harlan, *Kommentare* 1950.