
GERMAN CINEMA: A PLURALITY OF VISIONS –
AN INTERVIEW WITH GERD GEMÜNDE

Gerd Gemünden is the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professor in the Humanities at Dartmouth College and is chair of the Department of German Studies. He studied German, English, and Philosophy at the University of Tübingen before coming to the United States as an exchange student at the University of Oregon. Gemünden received his PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon. The focus of this interview is his contributions to research on the history and theory of German cinema. His most recently published book on Billy Wilder is *Filmmacher mit Akzent: Billy Wilder in Hollywood* (2006). Gemünden's continued work on exile cinema has yielded a volume on Marlene Dietrich, co-edited with Mary Desjardins, entitled *Dietrich Icon* (Duke University Press).

FOCUS You are a scholar of German from Germany, living, researching, and teaching in the United States. What led you to decide to build a career in America reliant on film?

GERD GEMÜNDE The career outlook for my field in Germany was not too positive when I was a student, and the situation is not necessarily better today. Opportunities were better in the United States, and my time spent at the University of Oregon as an exchange student left me with a favorable opinion of the American university system in general. In this country, students have the opportunity of more interaction with professors, an aspect I saw as very beneficial because I was able to become better acquainted with the individuals with whom I worked. I understood my colleagues better because of the academic climate, and I felt my studies were also improved because of this. Another aspect I saw as extremely positive was teaching German language courses as a graduate student. Teaching a class was a rewarding experience, allowing me to see first-hand the responsibilities of teaching.

FOCUS The field of German Studies is evolving today and this process is likely to continue in the future. With this in mind, how does

the discipline of Film Studies fit into the contemporary German department?

GG Within German Studies, Film Studies has become a staple of the discipline in the past ten years, due to the leadership of scholars like Anton Kaes and Eric Rentschler, as well as a number of others. Today, Film Studies is truly a bona fide and vibrant subfield.

FOCUS This is perhaps a very open-ended question without a truly definite answer. Does German national cinema exist, and if so, how is it characterized?

GG German cinema consists of many aspects; until a decade ago, the study of German cinema meant studying either Weimar Cinema or the New German Cinema of the 1970s and 80s. It is just in recent years that other periods have begun to be researched more extensively. German film has always been international, especially in the case of Weimar Cinema. This era always saw a constant pull between Los Angeles and Berlin, with notable influence from Austria, Hungary and Russia. Germany's national cinema is and has always been an internationalized cinema.

FOCUS In response to your previous answer, does German cinema coexist with Hollywood?

GG Hollywood has always been an important part of German cinema and the German imaginary, even in the Third Reich. Even during times in which German filmmakers or the industry critiqued Hollywood, they sought to emulate it. In postwar Germany, Hollywood films were used to “reeducate” Germans. For the New German Cinema, it was the bad object everyone loved. The comedies of the 90s wanted to imitate Hollywood without any sense of irony and self-reflexivity. If one traces the influence of Hollywood and German cinema throughout the twentieth century, you can see that the relationship is constantly reinvented.

FOCUS You have written works on Germans or those native to German speaking lands who have made a cinematic impact in the United

States. What do you think the appeal of their films is to Americans and Germans?

GG Every film and director seem to have a different appeal to audiences. In the case of Billy Wilder, he is considered by to be mostly an American director and is rarely seen as an outsider. He was a director who knew the system of Hollywood; he is an example of success there and not usually considered a foreigner, but his cultural baggage made him distinctly different from native directors. Wim Wenders brought something different to his films as an auteur of German cinema in the 1970s. In viewing his films, there is a certain sense of European sensibilities to them. Americans can see their country through a different lens, recasting it as nearly foreign.

FOCUS Do you think German film's recent successes in the United States, specifically this year's Oscar recipient *Das Leben der Anderen* signals a reemergence of interest in such films?

GG The past six to seven years have been very strong for German cinema. The films released in that time period have had a much more significant international impact. Many more German films have appeared as Oscar nominees in the past few years; we had not seen a true success for German film since the 1970s with *The Tin Drum's* Oscar win. These more recent nominations can be seen as quite significant if one takes them as a measure of German cinema's successes abroad. Such recent films have also been of a much higher quality with more meaningful stories, new stars, and better production values than in recent years, showing a much welcome departure from the "pop" films of the 1990s.

FOCUS You have often considered the issue of Americanization in your research. Do you think German exiles working in America have succumbed to this, or have they resisted?

GG I think it has been a mixture of the two. The pressure in the 1930s and 40s to assimilate both to the country and the studio system was great and came from all sides. Rules of production often affected a film's content, influencing what the exiles could and could not do. These films try to communicate to the viewer

the essence of the exile experience and the circumstances they faced, often making a connection between home and Hollywood. I would say that even the most apolitical film by an exile has the possibility of communicating some type of political message. Joe May's *Music in the Air*, written by Wilder, is a farce about a famous singer in which the filmmaker used cultural camouflage and mimicry to set forth his subtle message.

FOCUS How do you see the films of Germans that attempt to depict America? Are these portrayals realistic, do they fall short of this goal, or is realism not even their goal?

GG This varies greatly from film to film and from filmmaker to filmmaker. The notion of realism is subject to historical change. Some films, such as *A Foreign Affair*, claim to be representations of reality, capturing real historical events, but films such as *Paris, Texas*, a film considered by many to be an example of postmodern hyperrealism, show us that realism means something different at different times.

FOCUS In your recent talk at Miami University (Germans in Hollywood Film Conference, March 2007), you mentioned Billy Wilder's "plurality of visions." Taking this into consideration, does Wilder really belong to the American or German national narrative, or is he somewhere in the middle?

GG Wilder is somewhere in between, though if one had to choose a side, he would be an American director (he only wrote scripts during his time at UFA before 1933). Wilder was so much at home in Hollywood, showing a natural ability to handle studio demands, scripts, stars, and audience desires. He was at an advantage as an outsider, because he was able to see America in a different light than those who lived here; he provided a different lens for his viewers. Even though he was so tied to Hollywood, he displayed attributes of a distinctly European tradition.

FOCUS Your newest book on Marlene Dietrich shows how this enigmatic icon reflected multiple discourses such as feminism, film theory, and the Third Reich. Could you elaborate on this idea?

GG Dietrich is so interesting because she meant so many things to so many different people. Her fans include straight men and women, homosexuals, and bisexuals to name just a few groups. She had such a long career because she was able to appeal to different audiences, transforming her identity numerous times while retaining basic aspects of her star persona. For scholars, Dietrich is really a paradigmatic icon.

FOCUS Werner Herzog's 2005 *Grizzly Man* does not deal with the same issues other German filmmakers in America have confronted. Though Herzog is *not* an exile, do you see this film as somehow part of the traditions of the exiles?

GG Herzog is certainly a self-styled outsider, detaching himself from film schools and other institutions. He displays somewhat of a "renegade romanticism," but he is also one of a kind. This can be seen in films such as *Stroszek*, as he really concerns himself with the curiosities of American culture. He lacks the political side of the exiles, taking his own direction with his films.

FOCUS How do you see the state of German Film Studies today and in the future?

GG German Film Studies remains a vibrant and interesting field within German Cultural Studies and I believe it is still on an upswing. German films have really seen an improvement in quality in recent years, also as indicated by the programming of the Berlin Film Festival. Films released now exhibit more of an international appeal, which contributes to their success. Research on the historical aspects of film is becoming easier, and DVDs of older films make them more accessible for scholarly work. Recent work on "Unknown Weimar Cinema," for example, shows that even in the era which has attracted most scholarly activity, there is so much more to be discovered. German cinema of the 1950s, too, is finally been considered a worthy topic of inquiry. There is still a lot to be done – a great field for curious graduate students!

Dan McGee conducted this interview on April 11, 2007.
