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Introduction to Habsburg's Last War: The Filmic Memory (1918 to the Present)

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INTRODUCTION

Hannes Leidinger

It was Samuel Hynes who suggested, in his fascinating study on English war culture, *A War Imagined*¹, that the popular memory of the “Great War” from 1914 to 1918 has been recalled and influenced through the written word.² Apart from this estimation, analyses of different “cultures of memory” clearly show that there was a plethora of individual and collective forms of recollection such as—among many others—war memorials, remembrance days or other (frequent) commemorative events³

But keeping in mind the growing importance of cinematography since the 1890s and above all during “Europe’s seminal catastrophe” after the shots rang out in Sarajevo, it should be taken into consideration what Michael Paris, the editor of the 1999 omnibus volume *The First World War and Popular Cinema*,

1 Titles of scientific publications or printed sources (journals, novels, and so forth) are written in italics throughout the volume “(with the exception of the index)”. This applies also to film titles and technical or specialized terminology. Film titles in italics with quotation marks are British or American release titles.

2 Cf. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1990).

3 On Austria for instance: Oswald Überegger, *Erinnerungskriege: Der Erste Weltkrieg, Österreich und die Tiroler Kriegserinnerung in der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 2011); Werner Suppanz, *Österreichische Geschichtsbilder: Historische Legitimationen in Ständestaat und Zweiter Republik* (Böhlau: Vienna, 1998).

stated: The “filmic image was equally, if not more, influential for reconstructing that memory. And film continues to provide the dominant popular national interpretation of that War for most people, simply because of the ability of film to reach a far greater public than the printed word,” for instance, “not just with the initial exhibition of a film, but through subsequent release, through television screenings,” through videos and DVDs respectively.⁴

About a decade later, David Williams wrote detailed explanations on the topic, when he turned to “new sciences” in the process of modernization, “swiftly undermining the verbal epistemology of the ancients.” Referring to the first intellectual encounters with cinematography, he quoted a French journalist who got the following impressions: “Already, words are collected and reproduced; now life is collected and reproduced.” Thereby, photographs only “fixed a particular past moment,” while “cinematic images seemed rather to reproduce actuality, to invade the present.” Thus, the strangely invasive power of “moving pictures” overturned familiar notions of temporality. The result was “a relentless telescoping of time in which the boundaries between past and present appear to dissolve.”⁵ The phenomenon of “(filmed) time and space being rendered apparently simultaneous in the present”⁶ fostered the equating of history and its imagination, much to the chagrin of critical commentators. But at the same time, this cinematic visualization of the past secured the box office success of various “movies.”

4 Michael Paris, “Introduction,” in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: University Press, 1999), 2.

5 David Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 109.

6 Ibid.

Against this backdrop, an ever-growing number of scholars stressing the central role of the Great War in shaping the twentieth century also started to recognize the meaning of “moving images” to explain or (re-)construct history. Yet this scientific turn was not self-evident even a few decades ago. Michael Paris, focusing on the respective film productions in Austria, Britain and the Dominions, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, and the United States, was still surprised that—according to the significance of the theme—historians have devoted comparatively little attention to films” about World War One. There was an earlier interest in contemporary footage and particularly cinematic propaganda in the course of the European and global military hostilities up to 1918.⁷ But post-1918 productions still received scant attention around 2000.⁸

Nevertheless, Paris—figuring as a kind of a pioneer in the field of research—was more optimistic at the end of the introduction of his collective volume: “Excellent national studies have started

7 Cf. M.L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War* (London: MacMillan, 1982); Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Larry Ward, *The Motion Picture Goes to War: The United States Government Effort during World War I* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985). Later on see also for instance: Leslie Midriff DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Ulrike Oppelt, *Film und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg: Propaganda als Medienrealität im Aktualitäten- und Dokumentarfilm* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002); Philipp Stiasny, *Das Kino und der Krieg: Deutschland 1914–1929* (München, 2009). For Russia, including a chapter on film: Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995)

8 Paris, “Introduction,” 2–3.

to emerge,” Paris remarked.⁹ Equally, experts began to explore what might be considered key films, like “*All Quiet on the Western Front*”.¹⁰ And even Paris’s innovative attempt to present a synthesis or a comparative analysis of different countries was no flash in the pan: At least the filmic memory of the First World War in France, Great Britain, East and West Germany, as well the USA, anchored an anthology, edited by Rainer Rother and Karin Herbst-Meßlinger, as a central theme.¹¹ Specialists for various areas of study like philology, literary criticism, cultural and media sciences, publishing studies, ancient, modern, contemporary and art history also cooperated in 2008 to connect film analyses with a broader understanding of memorial culture.¹²

9 Ibid., 2. See also: Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp, eds., *Film and the First World War: Papers from the Fifteenth Conference of the International Association for Media and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995); Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War* (London: Routledge, 1997); Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, *Hollywood’s World War I: Moving Picture Images* (Bowling Green: Kentucky University Press, 1997).

10 For example: Modris Ekstein, “War, Memory and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*,” *Central European History* 13 (1980); Andrew Kelly, *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998)

11 *Der Erste Weltkrieg im Film*, ed. Rainer Rother and Karin Herbst-Meßlinger (München: edition text + kritik, 2009); cf. Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I*.

12 Barbare Korte, Sylvia Paletschek, and Wolfgang Hochbruck, eds., *Der Erste Weltkrieg in der populären Erinnerungskultur* (Essen: Klartext, 2008). Regarding cultures of memory in general, among others: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: Beck, 1999). With respect to World War I above all: Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Apart from these new trends, Austria—with the exception of one article in Michael Paris's book—was hardly ever in the focus of such scholarly endeavours, though this was not a foregone conclusion. Obviously, the legacy of the Habsburg monarchy was crucial for filmmaking all through the decades of the twentieth century. The old emperor Francis Joseph I as a symbol of the durability and decrepitude of the Danube monarchy has become an icon even before the “birth of moving images.” The years preceding the bloodshed of 1914 and the following years strengthened the trend. At that time, Francis Joseph “did not mind being on film at certain events,” as the important expert of language, culture, and (Austrian) film, Robert von Dassanowsky, put it.¹³ But, according to Dassanowsky, it was exactly the same aged emperor who “flatly rejected” even requests of famous directors “to film him and members of the imperial family for a ‘patriotic film’ that might be viewed as commercial and political exploitation.”¹⁴ Posterity had to accommodate the threads again, which has torn the First World War. With Karl Ehmann as the “venerable monarch” in the Jakob and Louise Fleck 1933 production *Unser Kaiser (Our emperor)*, the embodiment of the collapsed Habsburg state reappeared as an “obvious attempt to define sovereign Austrian identity along nostalgia for Kakania and as romanticized biopic positioned against the Pan-German threat of the nascent ‘Third Reich.’”¹⁵

But all of this, and especially the “old man of Schönbrunn,” centered around the idea of a peacetime “World of yesterday” before 1914. The Habsburg legacy did not fit in with the images and imaginations of war, the more so because the Dual Monarchy

13 Robert von Dassanowsky, *Austrian Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2005), 20.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 49.

resembled the invention of the operetta, the theater, and the novel, as Philipp Stiasny tries to point out in his introductory remarks to his article of this volume. These artistic influences were especially suited to the requirements of cinematic entertainment. Hence, and in line with Stiasny, the “old monarchy” of the “Casa de Austria” was “never only a historical and geographical, but rather an emotional region and era” of “longing” and cliques of amusement.¹⁶

Most of the time, “Vienna, the wine, and the waltz,” as well as the sentimental film in the regional setting of the Alps and the Danube regions, stood for the perfect antipode of “trenches, night patrols in barbed wire and disfigured landscape with ruins, shell-holes and craters filled with water,” sceneries which became symbols of a First World War being equated with the pictures of “*All Quiet on the Western Front*”.¹⁷

Such characteristics of many comparable movies refer also to another explanation for the disappearance of Austria-Hungary in films about World War One: The Habsburg army fought on other fronts, operated in other communication and occupation zones, was involved in mobile warfare, contrary to the trench warfare in France.

Under such circumstances, an approach to “Habsburg’s last war” above all in post-1918 feature films, but also in nonfiction productions and TV documentaries respectively, appears to be futile. And this seems to be even more true because of the dissolution of the empire, losing—as sometimes claimed—its relevance to posterity. Furthermore, the impact of the Second World

16 See Philipp Stiasny’s contribution in this volume.

17 Pierre Sorlin, “Cinema and the Memory of the Great War,” in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: University Press, 1999), 5–26, here: 20–21.

War superseded the events of 1914 to 1918 nearly completely, for instance with regard to the “partisan theme” in Successor States and Neighboring Countries of Austria-Hungary becoming part of the “Soviet Bloc” after 1945. Thus, even some of the authors in the present book have to admit that their topic—the First World War particularly in connection with Austria-Hungary—is at best a sideshow of the development of cinema, television or media in general and, the more so, of historiography in general.

To put it pointedly: Is it worth mentioning the theme at all?

The answer is clearly yes, for several reasons.

First of all, it goes without saying that Successor States of the Danube monarchy like Austria and Hungary, which once formed the nucleus of the Habsburg empire, could not fully ignore what they mostly considered an era of “defeat, humiliation, disruption and catastrophe,” not even in the sphere of arts and entertainment. There were always enough relevant productions to be taken into account.¹⁸

Second, instead of a complete disappearance of “old Austria’s final chapter” in film productions, an ideologization took place: In this sense, it was the theming of the topic by different parties, social forces and milieus as well as changing regimes from the immediate revolutionary consequences of the First World War to the rise of fascism, the establishment of totalitarian rule, the Cold War, and the impact of the fall of the Iron Curtain. In this connection, among other aspects, left or right wing cultures of remembrance left their traces in the “moving images” of various historical periods. For example, opposing perspectives in this regard are sometimes based on the contradiction between the integration of amusing entertainment with “Austrian charm and

18 See the following articles of László Deák-Sárosi, Márton Kurutz, and Hannes Leidinger.

good vibrations” in military genres and topics centered around the “Death of the Double-headed Eagle” on the one side, and the presentation of the Habsburg monarchy as a decadent and decayed, aristocratic and “bourgeois” empire doomed to fail, or even as a malicious and bellicose rogue state in (pacifistic) discourses with more or less communist or (left) socialist viewpoints, on the other.¹⁹

Third, from a national (or nationalist) position, a fragmentation manifested itself in the tendency to replace the Habsburg monarchy by its provinces or crown lands with specific ethnic composition and frictions (like Galicia, with its additional significant “Jewish character”), by legionaries fighting for their “real” and often alleged “ethnically homogeneous future fatherland,” but also by certain regions and front lines like Transylvania or the Isonzo valley representing the increased military use of some peoples of the Dual Monarchy, exceptional territorial claims or the “extraordinary will” to defend not so much the multi-ethnic empire as a whole but the “actual (national) home.”²⁰ Additionally, it is necessary to broach aspects and narratives like these also in terms of memorial cultures, long-term developments, and current situations. Therefore, one has to remember the changing perspectives of Austro-Italian relationships in the course of the twentieth century, as well as, for example, Czech-Hungarian, Romanian-Hungarian or Croatian-Serbian controversies up to the present.²¹

19 Among other presentations: Statements of Enikő Dáczy and Aleksandar Erdeljanović in their present articles.

20 Cf. Expositions of Karin Almasy, Francesco Bono, Enikő Dáczy, Václav Šmidrkal, Philipp Stiasny, Piotr Szlanta,

21 In this connection see the respective articles of Francesco Bono, Enikő Dáczy, László Deák-Sárosi, Aleksandar Erdeljanović, and Márton Kurutz.

Yet apart from key items and research questions already mentioned, but also apart from aspects such as the (dis)ability of international observers and especially filmmakers to differ between German and Austrian movies or the German-Hohenzollern empire and the Habsburg monarchy mainly dominated by German-speaking elites, there is also a fourth topic focus which should not be neglected: the reasons for the absence of special themes, in the concrete case of the First World War, generally, or the Dual Monarchy and Habsburg's last war specifically. Gaps like that require different explanations and perspectives. Hence, and notwithstanding the already addressed "fragmentation" of Austria-Hungary, these scientific approaches referring to a "history of the absent" or "the void" at all tend to tackle new scientific realms of investigation.²²

This deliberation ties in with a more fundamental problem of "hauntology" as an "ontological dysfunction": The presence of being is replaced by a deferred or absent non-origin, represented by the figure of the "ghost," which is neither present nor absent, neither absent nor alive—or by the idea of the transformation of the deceased or the perished into a specter. At the same time, the post-imperial notion of "Kakania"—as a proper example in this sense—goes hand in hand with the discussion about the "cinematographization of the world": Moving images shaping "realities" and "public opinion" waver between (the performance of) "authenticity" and "fabricated forgery of events," between realistic "news" or propagandist messages and "cinema as a shore of oblivion, a point or rest," or, to be even more concrete, between the experience and frequent reinterpretations of the traumatizing mass killing of war and the "inner cinematic phenomenon," its (changing) techniques, "patterns of performances and perceptions."

22 Most of all in the present chapter of Verena Moritz and partly also in the article of Enikő Dác.

Thomas Ballhausen tries to focus on these facets in his post-script of this omnibus volume with many further thoughts, additional suggestions, and final remarks on the (film) archive as a (constantly re-arranged) material basis, surrounded by receptions, re-presentations, re-assessments, and re-uses of sources and narratives.

On this occasion, I would like to thank all the contributors of the present collective work, particularly for their readiness to embark on an intellectual journey leading to sideshows of historical research work and sometimes to unusual interpretation approaches. Karin Almasy, Enikő Dácz, Karin Moser, Verena Moritz, Thomas Ballhausen, Francesco Bono, László Deák-Sárosi, Aleksandar Erdeljanović, Márton Kurutz, Piotr Szlanta, Václav Šmidrkal, and Philipp Stiasny made the effort to analyze different perspectives of Austrian, Czech-Slovak, German, Hungarian, Italian, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, and Slovenian cinema and television on the relevant themes, fictional and non-fiction film productions. Depending on different source situations and varying national preconditions, the authors decided to elucidate various time spans, single film productions and special research questions. Some were able to give historical-cross sections and overall views from 1918 to the present,²³ whereas others focused on the inter-war era²⁴ or the post-1945 period²⁵ as well as on the centennial commemoration of the outbreak of the First World War in 2014

23 Above all the chapters written by Václav Šmidrkal and Hannes Leidinger and with some focal points in different eras also the expositions of Verena Moritz and Piotr Szlanta.

24 See the contributions of Francesco Bono, Márton Kurutz, and Philipp Stiasny

25 Cf. Articles of Enikő Dácz, László Deák-Sárosi, and Aleksandar Erdeljanović

and the respective feature films and TV documentaries.²⁶ Parts of the texts mirror controversial national, individual, and ideological stances differing also—at least in a few cases—from the editor’s standpoint. Yet it was not the intention of the volume to smooth down deviations like that. The multitude of viewpoints reflects obvious internal controversies within Central, East and East-Central or South-East European societies as well as diverse (national) narratives in the countries covered, all of them once part or neighbor of the Habsburg empire.

One might criticize that the national perspectives and structure of this book prolongs traditional historical perceptions being highly questioned by new and fashionable trends of “transnational studies” and a *histoire croisée*. According to that, it has to be stressed that the Habsburg empire, its decline, dissolution, and aftermath is probably not the best research-objective for “transnational phenomena.” But, of course, perhaps the opposite is also true (referring sometimes to an arbitrariness of too far-reaching theories and—much more likely—to ubiquitous fashionable terms). Maybe epistemological deliberations on the subject have to be continued, though it could also be argued that the present volume, with its table of contents and national views offers comparisons and insights beyond “ethnic spheres,” patriotic narratives, ideological priorities, and state borders.

In any case, the authors of the volume know very well that it is only the moderate beginning of a synthesis in the field of film studies and historiography in general, based on closer cooperation between the Successor States and the adjacent countries of the former Danube monarchy.

26 The text of Karin Almasj and Karin Moser right at the front.