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Alessandra Magrin

## **Pawel Goral, Cold War Rivalry and the Perception of the American West.**

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## Pawel Goral, *Cold War Rivalry and the Perception of the American West*.

In his first monograph, *Cold War Rivalry and the Perception of the American West*, Pawel Goral, History lecturer at the University of Texas, Arlington, employs the myth of the American West as a critical lens to address the fascinating, albeit complex, theme of cultural memory and identity-building in Cold-War-divided-Germany. Goral's thesis argues how the two spheres of political influence shaped opposing views of the Western myth, and how each block respectively deployed it to accommodate their own nationalistic needs. This contributed, the author claims, to fill the cultural void left in the aftermath of the Third Reich, as well as to the formation of a unified sense of Germanness after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Goral's preferred means of investigation are German Western films of the 1960's and 1970's, also known as "Sauerkraut Westerns," which he analyses in their own national context. One learns in fact that "Karl May Westerns" were West German productions—owing, as the name suggests, to the novelistic tradition launched by Karl May (1842-1912)—which celebrated the white man's supremacy in the West (represented by Teutonic pioneers), but also portrayed Indian demise as an inexorable event. On the other hand *Indianerfilme*—the GDR's counterpart— inverted the traditional roles of heroes and foes of classic Westerns, exalting instead the positive role of Native Americans and stressing the gratuitous cruelty of Anglo-American settlers. This was a considerably radical stance, especially for the time, which bore clear anti-capitalist connotations and even pre-empted the advent of Native American revisionism in Europe (134). If Goral's analysis appears to shed light on an exciting and generally lesser known area of the popularisation of the myth of the West, such instructive information is unfortunately framed in a rather inconsistent structure which ultimately proves convoluted, if not somewhat frustrating for readers. Particularly enigmatic is the author's decision to place at the end of the book the chapter "The Quest for National Identity" which explores the theme of the "Karl May and German-Indian affinity" (106), a key subject and backbone of Goral's thesis, and heavily referenced since the start of the book, but for which a thorough and fulfilling explanation is inexplicably relegated to the last chapter. This arrangement proves counter-productive to his arguments, leaving readers at times unable to fully grasp all the relevant facets of Goral's study. For example, one might wonder why the impact of a seminal Western icon such as Buffalo Bill is never assessed, or why careful biographical information on Karl May is lacking, only to find this evidence untimely disclosed at the end of the book, rather than at the beginning, as one would expect.

The first chapter projects readers straight into the crux of the issue: the relations between West German Westerns and the legacy of the Holocaust. This is a critical subject, which would have benefited from further historical contextualization on German identity before WWII. The lack of such information leaves topics like the way "Karl May refashioned the image of a nation"(25), as well as aspects of Hitler's fascination with May's novels (22), partially unresolved until the elucidation eventually arrives in chapter five, with the excursus on the genesis of "German-Indian affinity"(110). Goral then introduces the interesting theory that "Karl May films" exerted a moral "absolutory" function on West Germans (30). He argues that the staging of an "othered" genocide, such as the Native Americans', metaphorically exorcised the ghosts of the Holocaust which haunted their national conscience (many West Germans at the time were quite reticent to publicly acknowledge their intentionality in WWII's atrocities), and allowed them to "move on," and develop a rehabilitated identity (50). This interpretation, which nevertheless appears well plausible, could have turned into a matter of compelling evidence, if only the author had relied more on factual sources such as interviews, diaries or oral histories, rather than depending merely on speculation.

Chapter two continues in this line and assesses the way in which *Indianerfilme* also dealt allegorically with the aftermath of the Third Reich. Given the Soviet protectorate, East German Westerns employed Native American genocide as an overt means to criticize America's politics, systematically linking capitalism to the fascist coercion of the Nazi regime. *Indianerfilme*, Goral reveals, promoted the rejection of Germany's totalitarian past and emphasized instead the DDR's "communist resistance," which took the shape of Native American struggle on the screen. The accurate plot analysis that Goral undertakes in this section provides further key examples of Soviet propaganda: scenes of Native American removal in *Weisse Wölfe (White Wolf)* hinted to the Jewish deportation, while the *Indianerfilme Blutsbrüder (Blood Brothers)*, of 1975, drew clear parallels between "the American raid on the Indian village and the My Lai massacre"(42), and eventually the film *Tödlicher Irrtum (Fatal Error)* portrayed the conflict between Anglo-Americans and Natives as an allegory for the never-ending class-struggle between "the oppressed and the oppressors, the exploited and those who exploit them" (56). The chapter comes to a close with a succinct statement which encapsulates a crucial point of Goral's argument: "both West Germans and East Germans understood that the keys to legitimization and shaping of a usable German identity were dissent and opposition to Nazism" (57). Such awareness was, as Goral's analysis illustrates, equally mirrored in both Karl May films and *Indianerfilme*.

The third chapter expands on the cinematic deconstruction and continues with an examination of German Westerns' themes such as "heroism, miscegenation and race." This section is regrettably confined to a description of leitmotifs where Goral pays more efforts to highlight similarities and differences between *Indianerfilme*, Karl May novels and their filmic adaptations, rather than explaining the roots of the prejudices and clichés which they display. Lastly, after an informative digression on the films' reception and foreign fortune, Goral presents a particularly well-argued section on landscape, in which he uncovers the successful "quest" of West and East German directors for an "authentic" as well as *heimatlich* (familiar, reminding of native soil) Western setting within the boundaries of Europe.

In the fourth chapter, Goral introduces another argument on the "unique" transnational nature of German Western films, emphasizing the importance of a transnational approach in studying this type of cultural history. While Goral rightfully argues that "intercultural transfer did not flow in only one direction" (97), his analysis focuses mostly on the "quintessentially German" side of the experience, failing to relate it to the broader context of European influences that made the transculturation of the Western genre such a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon. This might be because Goral supports the debatable notion that German Westerns were the trailblazers "of Westerns all across Europe" (70). In any case, a brief consideration of the forerunners of modern Euro-Westerns, the so-called Proto-Westerns, and in particular of a shaping film like *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien (The Kaiser of California)*, shot as far back as 1936 by Luis Trenker, (which, as a matter of fact, had already been produced transnationally: Austro-Italian director, German, Mexican, North American, and Italian settings) would have proven beneficial to a fuller understanding of the historical premises that made German Westerns of the 1960's and 1970's possible in the first place.

Overall the book amounts to a compendium on the history of German interest in the myth of the American West, particularly in its cinematic renditions. Goral's interpretations of the renewal of German identity driven by *Indianerfilme* and Karl May Westerns are captivating, though the strength of his arguments is at times undermined by a fragmented analysis, which reflects in the uneven book structure, and the author's excessive faith in speculative reasoning. Nevertheless, the breadth of detailed information about "Sauerkraut Westerns" and its heroes that *Cold War Rivalry and the Perception of the American West* offers, will prove useful as a practical reference for scholars interested in German-American cultural relations, Audience and Reception studies, and Transnational Cinema.

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## References

Electronic reference

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