

## Book Review

**Hanns Zischler. 2017. *Kafka geht ins Kino / Kafka va au cinéma / Kafka Goes to the Movies*. 4-disc DVD set. (Language: German, English, Czech, French, Italian, Russian, Hebrew. Subtitles: German, French, English. Region Code: all regions). Munich: Filmmuseum & Goethe-Institut. ISBN: 978-3-95860-095-9**

Good news for all admirers of Franz Kafka and his works, and good news, too, for aficionados of early European cinema: Hanns Zischler's most recent DVD collection entitled *Kafka geht ins Kino / Kafka va au cinéma / Kafka Goes to the Movies* is, in the true sense of the word, an eye-opener.

Due to his profession as an actor, author, film and theatre director Hanns Zischler is, of course, clearly an outsider in the realm of research on Kafka. Yet it is precisely because of Zischler's rather different perspective and pragmatic approach to the famous German-speaking author from Prague and his writings that Kafka's interest in the invention of the *Kinematograph* and his fascination with *bewegten Bildern*, i. e. moving images, has become an open secret. In 1996, Zischler published his highly original, painstakingly researched and thoroughly enlightening essay *Kafka geht ins Kino*,<sup>1</sup> translated into English as *Kafka Goes to*

*the Movies*.<sup>2</sup> Twenty years later, in 2017, a new, slightly revised, extended and amply illustrated edition of Zischler's research was published by Galiani publishers in Berlin, including a DVD with 6 sample films of various lengths - films Kafka saw and mentioned in his diaries and to his friends, films seen by his friends and described to him, or films reflecting his world and specific events or moments in his life. And now, thanks to the relentless efforts of Zischler, as well as the help, support and cooperation of numerous institutions such as the Filmmuseum Munich, the Goethe-Institut, WDR arte, the aforementioned Galiani publishing house and an impressive number of national and international film archives, the year 2017 also saw the publication of a true gem: a 4-disc DVD set of meticulously restored filmic material, the majority of which is hitherto either unknown or hardly known, offering a truly amazing array of insights into the world of silent movies at the beginning of the 20th century.

All in all, a dozen silent films are incorporated in the collection, from impressions of a short tramway ride through Prague in 1908 to the 78-minute-long documentary *Shiwath Zion* (Return to Zion) produced in 1921; from the French comedy *Nick Winter et le vol de la Joconde* (Nick Winter and the Theft of the Mona Lisa), filmed in 1911 and lasting a mere 10 minutes to the full feature melodrama *Die weiße Sklavin* (The White

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<sup>1</sup> Reinbek: Verlag Rowohlt Tb

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<sup>2</sup> 2003. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Slave), originally produced in Denmark in 1911 under the title *Den hvide slavehandels sidste offer*. Perfectly congenial piano accompaniment to all these films is provided by two German artists, Günther A. Buchwald and Richard Siedhoff. Also, definitely worth mentioning is the enclosed 28-page booklet with a plethora of background information about Kafka's penchant for motion pictures, early cinema in general and the various films chosen for this collection. One wonders though, why the publishers chose to forego a full translation of Hanns Zischler's insightful text, offering readers - and viewers - unacquainted with the German language only a brief synopsis in English and French.

For the well-initiated, especially those who are familiar with Zischler's aforementioned research, the best way to enjoy the various films is perhaps by viewing them in chronological order, from disc 1 to 4, as arranged by the publisher. All those less familiar with Kafka's biography, his work and Zischler's texts will most likely benefit most from starting the viewing process with the very last film of the collection, i. e. Hanns Zischler's 2002 documentary *Kafka va au cinéma*, which can be found on disc 4. This 55-minute-long documentary is basically a visualized version of Zischler's original research essay *Kafka geht ins Kino / Kafka Goes to the Movies* and thus is perfectly suited as a general introduction.

As Zischler rightly points out, attempting to establish a direct link between Kafka's writing and the films he had seen - or had

been told about - would be far too simplistic. Consequently, several films in this collection - such as the 13-minute documentary from 1909 entitled *Primo Circuito Aereo Internazionale di Aeroplani in Brescia* (First International Air Competition of Aeroplanes in Brescia) - should be viewed and understood as the visual commentary to a specific Kafka text, in this case his essay *Die Aeroplane in Brescia*, published on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1909 in the Prague daily, *Bohemia*. At the beginning of September 1909, Kafka and his friends Max and Otto Brod were visiting Italy and decided to attend the *Circuito* in Brescia: it is thus the real event, not the film, that triggered Kafka's report for the newspaper. According to Zischler, it is highly unlikely that Kafka and the Brod brothers ever saw the film, but it is certainly worthwhile comparing Kafka's text with the images of planes, pilots, mechanics and the awestruck audience preserved on celluloid.

In a way surprising, or perhaps not surprising at all, seems Kafka's penchant for funny or even trashy movies. The melodrama, *The White Slave*, adored by the contemporary public and thrashed by the critics, so fascinated Kafka, that he decided to incorporate a series of scenes and effects from the film into a new novel he planned to write together with Max Brod. With the help of a text fragment entitled *Richard und Samuel*, obviously meant to be the opening chapter of the novel, Zischler manages to uncover a truly impressive number of appropriations, at times, perhaps, knowingly but, perhaps, unknowingly altered or distorted by Kafka and Brod. Watching *The White Slave* with

such revelations in mind, therefore, only adds to the general entertainment and pleasure; by simultaneously letting us peek at Kafka's - and in this case also Brod's - desk and joining the two friends while they are staring at the screen of the *Royal Bioskop* Cinema in Prague, we become willing witnesses to a creative process from times long gone.

In the preface to his 2017 edition of *Kafka geht ins Kino*, Hanns Zischler confesses to a 40-year-long obsession with the subject. We can only marvel at so much stamina and assure him of our praise and thanks for providing the means - text as well as film - to share in this passion.

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