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Jacqueline Vansant. *Austria Made in Hollywood*. Camden House, 2019.

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Abstract

Review of Jacqueline Vansant. *Austria Made in Hollywood*. Camden House, 2019. 196 pp.

Keywords

Austria, film, Hollywood, film studies

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The connection between Hollywood and German/Austrian filmmakers has been the subject of much scholarly activity in the last years. Jacqueline Vansant's book, however, offers a unique look at how Hollywood has imagined Austria in its film productions. The book consists of five chapters that designate particular turning points in terms of Hollywood's image of Austria from the 1920s into the 1960s. Concentrating on films whose plots are primarily set in Austria, this book examines them with regard to the historical contexts in the United States and Austria. To do so, each chapter is ordered chronologically, for the most part, and by thematic content. The approach to the book is novel because it limits its focus to the representation of Austria in Hollywood pictures rather than exploring other nexuses between Austria and Hollywood, such as the Hollywood films of Austrian émigré and exile filmmakers. While there are articles and book chapters that similarly focus on the representation of Austria in Hollywood productions, most notably those from Jan-Christopher Horak, this is the first full-length work dedicated to the topic.

The introduction provides a solid history of representations of Austria in Hollywood and for that reason may be the most valuable part of the book. In it, Vansant introduces Siegfried Kracauer's theory about Hollywood's presentation of national types, distinguishing between "portraits" and "projections," with the former being objective and latter subjective. In the subsequent chapters, Vansant returns to this theory in examining specific representations of Austria. By looking at Austria and Austrians as presented across the decades in Hollywood films of the early to mid-twentieth century, the author arrives at the conclusion that these films also provide commentary on American culture at the time. In the analyses of specific films that follow, this approach is generally convincing.

The book begins with an analysis of two films, *Merry-Go-Round* (1923) and *The Wedding March* (1928), from Hollywood's first prominent Austrian director Erich von Stroheim. Vansant persuasively connects the nostalgia that Stroheim evoked for "old Vienna" with the new American self-consciousness vis-à-vis Europe after World War I. Both films highlight the decadence and hierarchical structure of Austria, calling into question the American fascination with European aristocracy, and thereby confirming a sense of American pragmatism by comparison. In the 1930s, according to Vansant, a number of romance comedies from Paramount Studios set in Austria provide direct commentary on contemporary topics in the United States. Two such films, *Evenings for Sale* (1930) and *Champagne Waltz* (1937), tackle the challenges of the Great Depression and domestic debates concerning migration, while the film *Breath of Scandal* (1960) provides commentary on American discourses of sexuality.

The *Anschluss* was a significant moment for Austrian representations in the United States, so much that two chapters of the book are dedicated to the event. According to Vansant, some films of these films are indicative of Hollywood's reluctance to make films that overtly criticize the Third Reich; setting the films in Imperial Austria provided Hollywood the opportunity to attack Germany's politics indirectly while maintaining the commercial and entertainment values. Other films, such as *So Ends Our Night* (1941), *They Dare Not Love* (1941), and *Once upon a Honeymoon* (1942), directly depict the plight of Austrians under Nazi control. These films, argues Vansant, could be used to convey the seriousness of the *Anschluss* to an American public that might not have grasped the severity in 1938.

In terms of Hollywood productions of the postwar, the book focuses on two films from the 1960s that deal with contemporary issues through the memory of recent Austrian history: *The Cardinal* (1963) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). While *The Cardinal* simultaneously probes Austrian history while confronting contemporary issues, Vansant states, *The Sound of Music* presents a past Austrian landscape as an escape from the present. Of course, when one thinks about English-language films set in Austria, Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) immediately comes to mind. The author, however, rationalizes the omission of this classic due to it being a primarily British production.

This book has many strengths that include its thorough introduction, which provides a useful overview and history of the depiction of Austria in Hollywood film, as well as the convincing analysis of individual films in the chapters. Not only do Vansant's readings of the films in focus provide insight into how Hollywood viewed Austria, but also how these representations of Austria often comment on social and political debates in the United States. Furthermore, the legwork done to compile comprehensive lists of Hollywood films set in Austria that are separated by the degree to which Austria factors into these respective films will most certainly be a help to other researchers. As is often the case, however, the book is not without its faults. One of these is that there is an unevenness in the treatment of the films represented in each chapter. Some of the films and the subsequent analyses seem more logically positioned than others. For instance, in chapter five, the analysis of Otto Preminger's *The Cardinal* seems vastly more consequential than the take on the musical *The Sound of Music*. Whereas Vansant makes a compelling case that the former film critically confronts dubious aspects of recent Austrian history, the latter is included for its uncritical qualities by comparison. Much of the same can be said about the selection of films in other chapters. While the analyses of the films are strong, one sometimes is left wishing for more about the production history. Also, it is not entirely clear why the book ends in the 1960s. What comes after this period remains untouched, save for some cursory mentions in a very brief conclusion of less than five pages. In sum, this book's contribution lies in its unique methodology of looking at Hollywood depictions of Austria and its insightful

individual readings of films and will be a useful reference for scholars of European and Hollywood film.

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