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Prestige

Jean-Marc Barr in "Zentropa" . . . An inky, hermetic nightmare universe that is visually eloquent but dramatically inert.

MOVIE REVIEW

A Metaphor for Post-WWII Confusion

By PETER RAINER
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Zentropa" (Nuart) opens with a shot of train tracks moving inexorably beneath your gaze while Max von Sydow intones, "You will now listen to my voice." It's a lugubrious, you-are-getting-sleepier opening to a movie that only gets more lugubrious as it goes along.

Directed by young Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier, it's innovative in its technique but formalized and clammy as drama. It suffers from what James Agee once called "rigor artis."

Six months after the end of World War II, an American of

German descent, Leo Kessler (Jean-Marc Barr), comes to Germany to work as a trainee sleeping-car conductor for Zentropa Railways, which once transported Jews to concentration camps and now carries Germans and American officers. Leo is a bit of a blank,

which is probably intentional: He is the innocent onlooker, the conscience of the Allied occupiers, the sacrificial lamb—take your pick.

Von Trier works up an inky, hermetic nightmare universe that is visually eloquent but dramatically inert. The sequence that works best is also the most conventional: Near the end of the film Leo plants a bomb beneath the train and then, having second

thoughts, tries furiously to disconnect it. Von Trier may not take this as a compliment, but he's far more adept at melodrama than metaphysics.

As a metaphor for postwar confusion, the universe of "Zentropa" (Times rated: Mature) is certainly apt. Various intrigues—such as Leo's affair with a mysterious German woman (Barbara Sukowa), or the periodic intercession of the Nazi terrorists called "Werewolves"—help relieve the stupor. Eddie Constantine, familiar from, among other films, Godard's "Alphaville," shows up as an American officer, and it's good to see him again looking as weathered and leathery as ever. The final sequence has drowning imagery that is almost frighteningly lyrical. Von

Trier is undeniably talented, but "Zentropa," which won the 1991 Jury Prize at Cannes, comes across mostly as an exercise in pseudo-profundity. It's got more metaphors than it knows what to do with.

'Zentropa'

Leopold Kessler Jean-Marc Barr
Katharina Hartmann Barbara Sukowa
Lawrence Hartmann Udo Kier
Eddie Constantine Colonel Harris
A Prestige Films presentation. Director Lars Von Trier. Producer Peter Aalbaek Jensen. Executive producers Gerard Mital, Gunnar Obel, Patrick Godeau and Francois Duplat. Screenplay by Lars Von Trier and Niels Vørsel. Cinematographers Henning Bendtsen, Jean-Paul Meurisse, and Edward Klosinsky. Editor Herve Schneid. Costumes Manon Rasmussen. Music Joakim Holbek. Set designer Henning Bahs. Sound Per Streit Jensen. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes.
Times rated Mature.