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A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism

Edited by
Neil H. Donahue

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11: Expressionism and Cinema: Reflections on a Phantasmagoria of Film History

Sabine Hake

NO OTHER FILM IN WORLD CINEMA is as closely identified with a particular movement or style as *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920) is with Expressionism. Similarly, no other film has been invoked so frequently to make sense of Weimar culture and society and, even more problematically, to shed light on the mass appeal of National Socialism. *Caligari's* almost mythical status continues in competing accounts of its production and reception, contradictory claims about its relevance to the evolution of form and meaning in silent cinema, and highly speculative assertions about its place in German film history (Budd 1990). In the same way that *Caligari* denies the comforts of closure, the Expressionist film in general also resists easy definition. However, its elusiveness in terms of critical category has not precluded its continuing resonance in film history and cultural criticism, as well as in later filmic and multi-media practices. As regards the study of Weimar culture, the inevitable slippages in meaning can be seen most clearly in the two “imaginaries” identified with “Weimar cinema” and “Expressionist film” (Elsaesser 2000, 34) and their respective contribution to the historical, theoretical, and filmic reconstruction of German modernity.

Designed by Walter Röhrig, Hermann Warm, and Walter Reimann, *Caligari* is known best for its painted backdrops, false perspectives, skewed angles, dramatic lighting, and graphic effects (Robinson 1997). As told by screenwriters Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, the story follows the mysterious Dr. Caligari, who arrives at the fairground of a small town with the somnambulist Cesare. A series of murders strikes fear among the townspeople and has a devastating effect on three young friends caught in a love triangle, with one of the men, Allan, killed and the woman, Jane, abducted by the somnambulist. The framing story, which places the man's best friend Francis in an insane asylum, leaves it open whether he is the victim of a mad doctor or his own delusions. Recent findings suggest that the film's complicated narrative structure was the product of a series of deliberate artistic and economic decisions. For that reason, *Caligari* cannot be

reduced to an expression of authoritarian tendencies in German society, and even less can it be viewed as a premonition of Hitler. In presenting the dramatic events in a highly stylized setting, director Robert Wiene and producer Erich Pommer of the Decla studio sought to achieve two things: to distinguish their product from the majority of genre films produced during the period and, furthermore, to strengthen film's ties to the other arts by emphasizing its aesthetic qualities. And indeed, as the history of Weimar cinema shows, the references to Expressionism gave the art films made after *Caligari* a clear advantage in domestic and foreign markets and contributed to the subsequent transformation of cinema into a legitimate middle-class diversion.

But what is specifically Expressionist about *Caligari*? In narrative terms, the story translates the anxieties and resentments of the war and postwar years into specific melodramatic constellations. The appearance of a stranger destroys the appearance of harmony and order. At the same time, the otherness embodied by Dr. Caligari and his medium facilitates moments of transgression, including erotic ones. Thematically, these disruptions are articulated through the fascination with madness as both an alternative state of being and a metaphor of disintegration. Whereas the first refers back to German Romanticism and its critique of rationality, the second gives rise to a fundamentally modern critique of authoritarianism (Donahue 1994). Similarly, the film's rejection of conventional definitions of reality can be interpreted as liberating or traumatizing, either leading to an expansion of the visible world toward the fantastic and the imaginary or announcing the total disintegration of traditional distinctions between subject and object. The deep ambivalence toward modernity culminates around the central figure of Caligari, whose double role as savior and tyrant articulates the precarious relationship between knowledge and power and the disturbing similarities between magic/sorcery and cinema that must be considered central to the Expressionist imagination.

Not surprisingly, the new technologies of vision play a key role in what can be described as the driving forces behind Expressionism in the cinema: its tendency toward stylization, its exploration of ambiguities, and its fascination with vision as the founding site of modern identities. The foregrounding of visuality and its destabilizing effect on traditional notions of identity is most evident in its departure from one-point perspective, with its ordered, stable worldview, and in its heavy reliance on scenarios of looking: Caligari's dark glasses, Cesare's large eyes, and Jane's hypnotized stare. Through the attractions of the fairground, *Caligari* comments on the mass appeal of early cinema and the dangers of spectatorship. The film's self-identification with the traditions of the variety show is underscored by the melodramatic acting style and the deliberately theatrical settings. Yet through its uniquely filmic effects, including animation, *Caligari* also demonstrates the new pleasures to be gained through spectatorial

constellations modeled after the unconscious, a reference obviously to the affinities between early cinema and psychoanalysis. The introduction of an unreliable narrator has prompted some scholars to explore the connection between narrative ambiguity and the profound crisis of meaning after the loss of the war and the collapse of the empire (Murphy). Yet the addition of a framing story has also convinced others to read the film as a reassertion of the legacies of Romanticism against the fundamental ruptures brought about by mass culture and modernity (Kasten 1990, 39–51).

These positions are symptomatic of the divided critical reception that has linked *Caligari*, and the Expressionist cinema as a whole, to the history of Weimar cinema and the competing views of film as a reflection of social reality or an expression of artistic processes. They are identified with two influential studies, Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952). In his socio-psychological study of Weimar cinema, Kracauer relied heavily on Expressionist themes and motifs in uncovering the "psychological dispositions or tendencies that prevail within a nation at a certain stage of its development" (6) — in this case, Germany after the First World War. Without access to *Caligari*'s original script, Kracauer interpreted the addition of the framing story as symptomatic of broader tendencies in German society to suppress all challenges to its authoritarian structures and social hierarchies. Expressionism's characteristic wavering between rebellion and submission, in turn, allowed him to detect pre-fascist tendencies behind what he saw as Weimar cinema's preoccupation with father-son conflicts and its uncanny fixation on madmen and tyrants. The result: a succession of tyrants and despots from *Caligari* to *Mabuse*, with Hitler as their final real-life reincarnation. Coming from art history, Eisner chose a formalist approach and focused primarily on thematic and stylistic characteristics; hence her conclusion that "der phantastische deutsche Stummfilm dieser Zeit im Grunde oft nur als eine Art von Weiterentwicklung romantischer Visionen erscheint und daß eine moderne Technik den Imaginationen einer Traumwelt lediglich neue plastische Form verliehen hat" (the German cinema is a development of German Romanticism, and that modern technique merely lends visible form to Romantic fancies; 106). Both critics saw the Expressionist film less as a product of its times than as a manifestation of German identity and its inherent dilemmas, with Eisner underscoring the centrality of the *Dämonische* (in the Goethean sense) to the national imagination and with Kracauer constructing a teleology that implicates the national unconscious in the rise of National Socialism. Recent challenges to Kracauer's and Eisner's histories of Weimar cinema have shifted attention to international connections and popular traditions, a development that has also opened up new perspectives on the Expressionist film.

The coupling of film and Expressionism has always been problematic, with some scholars characterizing most films from the Weimar period as

Expressionist (Courtade), with many others limiting the term to the first half of the decade (Cooke), and with a few questioning the validity of the term, except in the case of *Caligari* and its less successful imitations (Salt). Some read the Expressionist film primarily as a response to social problems, while others emphasize its aesthetic qualities (Scheunemann). Some see these films as the culmination of the artistic innovations of Wilhelminian cinema, whereas others emphasize their haunting presence within Weimar cinema. And there is still little agreement whether Expressionism is analyzed best through the categories of ideology critique or film aesthetics. An overview of the scholarship is therefore bound to produce more questions than answers. Major points of contestation include: Is Expressionism in the cinema a style, a movement, or a period? A style or a Rieglian *Kunstwollen* (will to style)? An aesthetics or an epistemology? A textual quality or a spectatorial effect? A set of narrative themes and motifs or the result of particular visual and imaginary constellations? The self-representation of an epoch through visual means or the manifestation of national character in narrative form? An artistic rebellion against cultural and social conventions or a calculated response to the demands of product differentiation? An active participant in blurring the boundaries between high and low culture or the direct manifestation of intense conflicts and contradictions within Weimar society? A departure from the medium's inherent realism, as suggested by its photographic nature, or the first phase in the development of new technologies of illusion, simulation, and virtual reality? The German contribution to the European film avant-garde or the product of a cinematic *Sonderweg* (special path) that separates German cinema from other national cinemas?

Caligari's phenomenal success paved the way for a number of art films distinguishable above all by their artificial settings, strange characters, and bizarre story lines. What many of these films shared was their heavy reliance on atmosphere, or *Stimmung*, as the unifying force that synthesized disparate literary motifs, visual traditions, perceptual modes, emotional dispositions, and cultural sensibilities. The preference for chiaroscuro, or *clair-obscur*, lighting represents only the most obvious manifestation of this highly symptomatic function of *Stimmung*. While Expressionist elements appeared in a number of genres and oeuvres, only a few films aimed at a radical transformation of the visible world by projecting extreme psychological states onto highly constructed interiors and exteriors.

Most of the Expressionist films were produced between 1920 and 1923. These years of great political and economic instability brought failed revolutionary uprisings and military putsches, mass unemployment and hyperinflation, and widespread poverty and disorientation, and finally, the stabilization of the currency in 1924. Often associated with the end of Expressionism, the so-called stabilization period gave rise to the optimistic,

pragmatic, detached, and occasionally cynical views on technological progress and social change that found expression in the realistic styles associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a term usually translated as New Sobriety or New Objectivity (McCormick, 15–37).

Among the films typically identified as Expressionist, only a few present a unified new worldview; many more incorporate Expressionist elements into existing generic traditions and filmic styles. In a narrow sense, the label “Expressionist” can be applied to all films that move beyond conventional notions of reality, as established by realist and naturalist traditions, and seek to create more powerful reality effects based on perceptions, emotions, and sensations. These films include Karl Heinz Martin's never released *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (From Morn to Midnight, 1920), an adaptation of the acclaimed Georg Kaiser play, and his lost *Das Haus zum Mond* (The House to the Moon, 1920), about a mysterious house and its eccentric inhabitants; Hans Werckmeister's rediscovered science fiction film *Algol* (1920); and a relatively unknown rural melodrama, *Torgus* (1921), directed by Hanns Kobe. Other films often cited in this group are *Genuine* (1920), *Raskolnikow* (1923), and *Orlacs Hände* (The Hands of Orlac, 1924), three Wiene films that enjoyed modest commercial success. As for the better-known classics, Lupu Pick's *Scherben* (Shards, 1921) and *Sylvester* (New Year's Eve, 1924) are frequently described as Expressionist because of their symbolically charged interiors. But a strong emphasis on psychological motivation also links these films to the emerging genre of the so-called *Kammerspielfilm* (chamberplay film), an important part of Weimar cinema, and its critical investigation of familial structures and social milieus. *Schatten* (Warning Shadows, 1923), Arthur Robison's exploration of the affinities between film and dream, and *Das Wachsfingerkabinett* (Waxworks, 1924), Paul Leni's first directorial success after years of working as a set designer, share the Expressionist preference for episodic narratives, spatial metaphors, and visual tropes. Yet these films are equally indebted to the techniques of the fantastic that were cultivated first by pre-cinematic diversions like the shadow-play and the curio show.

The difficulty of establishing a corpus of Expressionist films should not distract from the considerable influence of the Expressionist movement, which revolutionized theater, literature, and the visual arts during the 1910s, on a wide range of filmic practices during the early 1920s. Perhaps even more important, the elusiveness of the term “Expressionism” does not necessarily contradict its usefulness as a heuristic device in bringing together often contradictory aesthetic and cultural influences and in reconstructing the changing alliances between avant-garde movements and popular tastes since the late nineteenth century. Historically, the Expressionist movement must be described as an artistic response to a fundamental crisis in the institutions of power and the organization of culture, a crisis that

had culminated in the bloodshed of the First World War and contributed to the fall of the monarchy and that would continue to haunt the Weimar Republic and its tentative attempts to establish parliamentary processes and defend democratic principles. Expressionists during the 1910s set out to measure the shock of modernity through the experience of the big city, the crisis in the institutions of power, the dramatic changes in class and gender relations, the transformation of marriage and family life, and so forth. The trauma of the war profoundly affected these visions of modernity by introducing a more anxious, troubled, pessimistic tone. Thus where Expressionist artists and writers had conjured up radical social utopias and dreams of individual liberation, the filmmakers used the Expressionist provocation primarily to reflect on the limits and failures of self-realization.

As an aesthetic phenomenon, Expressionism allowed Weimar filmmakers to respond to the gradual codification of classical narrative with an emphatic validation of the art film. Situated between an early “cinema of attractions” (Tom Gunning) and the cinema of narrative integration, *Caligari* exhibited many of the traits that had characterized German film culture during the 1910s, including the tradition of the fantastic identified with names like Henrik Galeen and Paul Wegener and the demands for artistic quality associated with the *Autorenfilm* (authors’ film), a type of film associated with particular literary authors or screenwriters. The fact that the Expressionist style developed its distinctive characteristics (for example, the emphasis on frame composition, the attention to set design) based on an incomplete articulation of the rules governing classical narrative has prompted some critics to describe early German cinema as backward or retarded by international standards (Salt). However, it might also be argued that these differences allowed Weimar film artists to utilize the conventions of early cinema for the formal concerns of the avant-garde and to address contemporary problems through subjective perspectives and imaginary worlds unencumbered by the laws of classical narrative. Thus the combination of retardation and innovation produced a quintessential modern vision of cinema and a profoundly filmic vision of modernity that, to add to the contradictions, was often achieved through the deceptively antimodern stories and images identified with Expressionism.

From an economic perspective, the Expressionist film responded to the studios’ need to reach new audiences through the production of films advertised as innovative, creative, and provocative in form as well as content. Especially at Decla Bioscop, the company responsible for *Caligari* and several other Wiene films, these new art films became an important aspect of product differentiation. The references to Expressionism in reviews and advertisements invested the act of moviegoing with an aura of cultural relevance, a strategy that proved highly effective in a conservative middle-class society still ruled by sharp distinctions between high and low

culture. Introduced during a period of rapid consolidation in the film industry, the label “art film” also gave German productions a unique identity on foreign markets. *Caligari* sparked an artistic trend known as *Caligarisisme* in France, energized the cine-club movements in Great Britain, and caused some concerns about “a German invasion” among the Hollywood majors. Together with Ernst Lubitsch’s *Madame Dubarry* (1919; released in the U.S. as *Passion*) and Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (1920; released in the U.S. as *The Golem*), the famous Wiene film became part of a package of German films sold for U.S. distribution in the early 1920s. In the United States, these films established favorable conditions for the first wave of migration to Hollywood by those — Lubitsch, Murnau, Jannings, and Pommer — responsible for the international success of the German art film.

The precarious balancing act between film as art and film as commodity is nowhere more apparent than in the Expressionist movie posters. They were part of elaborate advertising campaigns that in the case of *Caligari* included a spectacular Berlin premiere on the elegant Kurfürstendamm, extensive commentary in art journals and literary magazines, and the appearance throughout the city of mysterious banners proclaiming “Du mußt Caligari werden!” (You Must Become Caligari!). The posters for two famous Decla productions (reproduced in this volume), *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* and *Genuine*, illustrate well the close connection, central to the Expressionist film as a whole, between the eclectic use of heterogeneous forms, styles, and traditions and the direct address to both the core group of enthusiastic moviegoers and the more hesitant educated middle classes. For the *Caligari* poster, the graphic-design firm of Ledl Bernhard used the flat surfaces, simple shapes, and intense colors (for example, the orange sky, the blue footpath) known from Lucien Bernard’s famous *Sachplakate* (object-based posters) advertising AEG light bulbs and Bosch sparkplugs. In evoking the orientalist world of *Genuine*, the influential graphic artist Josef Fenneker combined the elongated forms of *Jugendstil* and *art nouveau* with the graphic look favored by the painters of the Viennese Secession. Both posters present erotic fantasies that thrive on the affinities between passion and madness, obsession and violence, excess and degeneration. While making some use of the diagonal lines, sharp angles, and stark contrasts typically identified with Expressionism, Bernard and Fenneker take most of their thematic and stylistic elements from the rich tradition of nineteenth-century exoticism. This is especially apparent in the juxtaposition of white woman and dark man, the preference for phallic forms and organic shapes, the fusion of animate and inanimate world, and the symbolic investment in sexual desire as a transgressive but also potentially deadly experience.

The Expressionist film must be examined as an aesthetic *and* economic phenomenon, and similarly its main representatives must be evaluated

within the changed conditions of filmmaking during the early 1920s. In many smaller companies, but also at Ufa (Universum Film AG) studio's independent producer units, a guild model based on teamwork prevailed over traditional notions of individual creativity. Accordingly, the signature style of *Caligari* arose less from a lack of materials, as the myth would have it, than from an excess of creative talent. The close identification of the Expressionist film with highly stylized settings confirms the formative influence of set designers like Röhrig, Herlth, and Warm, who, often with no more than plaster, paper, cardboard, and paint, constructed what might alternatively be called a *mise-en-scène* of the modern uncanny, the historical unconscious, or the national imagination. Famous for translating the rather conventional stories of fear and desire, longing and renunciation, revolt and subordination, into uniquely filmic effects, Mayer wrote the scenarios for classics like *Caligari*, *Genuine*, *Scherben*, and *Sylvester* (Kasten 1994, Frankfurter). Considered the unifying force behind the Expressionist vision in its various fantastic, naturalist, and realist manifestations, Mayer remains best known for his collaboration with Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. Meanwhile, Wiene emerged as the director most closely identified with Expressionism in the narrow sense. After the phenomenal success of *Caligari*, he directed *Genuine*, a lurid orientalist melodrama about a blood-thirsty femme fatale, and continued with an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *Raskolnikow*, and the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story of *Orlacs Hände*. In these films, Wiene developed further the main themes of the Expressionist canon: the crisis of masculinity and the threat of female sexuality, the power of the unconscious and the dissociation of the self, and the social pathology of evil and violence (Jung and Schatzberg).

Famous directors such as Ernst Lubitsch, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, and Fritz Lang played only a minor role in the creation of an Expressionist vision for the screen, a fact that makes them well-suited to illuminate its presentation of fantasy, desire, and identity from the margins. For instance, on the level of set design, the confectionery-style decor in Lubitsch's *Die Bergkatze* (The Mountain Cat, 1921) can be said to introduce a humorous, and decidedly female, alternative to the Expressionist preoccupation with a masculinity in crisis. Similarly, Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) dissolves the perceptual uncertainties and psychological ambiguities of Expressionism into a pure poetics of the image indebted equally to nineteenth-century Romantic painting and twentieth-century photographic realism. *Der Schatz* (The Treasure, 1923), directed by Pabst, explores the symbolic currencies of light and shadow in the rural melodrama, a genre far removed from the big-city settings preferred by Expressionist drama and poetry. Finally, in *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler, 1922) Lang takes advantage of Expressionism's dependency on trivial literature, including its preoccupation with sex, crime, and

violence, and simultaneously responds to the movement's grand gestures of innovation with the famous quip about Expressionism as a mere game.

The most ambitious attempt to define the Expressionist film during the time of its ascendancy was made by Rudolf Kurtz, the editor of the influential trade paper *Lichtbild-Bühne*. In *Expressionismus und Film* (1926), Kurtz welcomed the convergence of a modern mass medium and a new art movement as an essential and integral part of the modernist imagination. For him, the Expressionist film was simultaneously a product of aesthetic modernism and a response to the growing disenchantment with modernity. Like futurism, cubism, constructivism, and surrealism, Kurtz argued, Expressionism mediates between art and technology and seeks transcendence through an aestheticization of physical reality. However, these processes require the presence of a true film artist who transforms the images into visions. His advocacy of individual creativity reveals the strong influence of Alois Riegl's above-mentioned notion of *Kunstwollen*, a Nietzschean will to artistic expression that Kurtz considers more important than any considerations of form or style. Resisting film's mimetic tendencies and its false promises of immediacy, Expressionism provides a "Hilfsmittel, um Wirkungen, die jenseits des Photographierbaren liegen, optisch zu beschwören" (important means of conjuring up optical effects that lie beyond the realm accessible to photography; Kurtz, 84), but only as long as filmmakers acknowledge the metaphysical dimension of the filmic image. By enlisting Expressionism in the advancement of film as art, Kurtz betrayed typical middle-class prejudices against film as "mühevolle Apperzeption" (effortless perception; 126), a cheap entertainment for the masses. Yet at the same time, he relied on the most advanced technical means to enlist the new medium in a re-enchantment of the world. Instead of reducing the Expressionist film to certain formal devices, he extolled its spiritual dimensions. But as a pragmatist, he also defended the need for economic compromises; being fully aware that "was die Zustimmung dieser Massen nicht erzwingt, ist für die deutsche Filmindustrie schädlich" (what does not win the approval of the masses is detrimental to the German film industry; 129).

On the basis of these preliminary remarks, is it at all possible to give a working definition of Expressionist film? To begin with formal categories, *Caligari* and its successors might be defined best through their highly original approach to *mise-en-scène*, lighting, and camerawork and their equally distinctive narrative structure and treatment of images, figures, and symbols. The Expressionist films break with filmic conventions in two equally significant ways: by transforming, rather than merely recording, the visible world and by combining the representational paradigms of showing and telling. The underlying assumptions about reality as a construction are repeatedly thematized through the characters' dreams, delusions, and hallucinations, through optical tricks and devices (for example,

keyholes, shadows, mirrors), and through the extensive use of masking and iris-in/ iris-out in creating focus and sustaining continuity. This pervasive uncertainty surrounding the act of vision continues on the narrative level in the preference of Expressionist films for framing stories and episodic structures, flashbacks and ellipses, unreliable narrators, and self-reflexive comments on the act of storytelling.

In addressing this aesthetic tension between subjective and objective reality and in contemplating its broader implications for modern mass society, the Expressionist film relies heavily on narrative themes and motifs taken from German Romanticism, beginning with the figure of the *Doppelgänger* (double). Important sources of inspiration include early nineteenth-century painting (Friedrich, Spitzweg) and literature (Hölderlin, Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann); yet the sensationalist styles of the Gothic novel and the moral messages of the fairytale must be considered equally relevant to the production of Expressionist *Stimmung* (Schütz). As noted earlier, these heterogeneous influences are usually processed through the turn-of-the-century sensibilities associated with symbolism, aestheticism, and *Jugendstil*. Of course, the Expressionist film also shares a number of characteristics with the Expressionist drama, such as its preoccupation with the crisis of masculinity and the dangers of female sexuality, its preference for social and ethnic types rather than psychologically developed characters, its fascination with madness, violence, and degeneracy, and its above-mentioned vacillation between rebellion and submission (von Cossart). Finally, the connections between Expressionist theater and film are most evident in the theatrical staging conventions, the frontal acting of the characters, the highly stylized costumes, and the general preference for exaggerated gestures, movements, and physiognomies. These eclectic tendencies and hybrid influences make the Expressionist film an integral part of the new alliance between mass culture and modernity and a privileged medium for articulating the hopes and desires generated by this momentous encounter. Not surprisingly, the extensive references to the other arts established the Expressionist film as an important model of intertextuality for all of Weimar culture (Hoesterey). The scenarists who applied these integrative principles most successfully — Hanns Heinz Ewers, best known for *Der Student von Prag* (The Student of Prague, 1913 and 1926) and *Alraune* (Mandrake, 1928 and 1930), and Thea von Harbou, the author of several Lang films, most notably *Metropolis* (1927) — were also the ones with extensive commitments in literature, theater, and, most problematically, politics.

Contributing to what might be called a reenactment of the modern uncanny, the Expressionist film appears above all as an experiential or perceptual phenomenon, defined less by certain visual styles than by uncertain visual effects. For that reason, the films always also comment on the status of cinema as a technique of illusionism and a technology of light (Guerin).

Internal conflicts and desires are projected onto an external world that has become foreign and strange. This process finds expression in the destabilization of the subject at the center of the narrative. References to spectatorship and its dangers are ubiquitous, whether in the form of dreams and hallucinations, voyeuristic and exhibitionistic tendencies, or instances of discovery, surveillance, and observation. These self-reflexive references are sustained by the conceptual tension between vision as illusion and revelation and the contested status of visuality as the foundation of knowledge or ignorance, blindness or insight. Both definitions of vision expand the boundaries of the real beyond the traditional subject-object divide; hence the strong affinities with the fantastic, the grotesque, the occult, and the supernatural.

Many Expressionist films create a fantasy space that foregrounds the medium's affinity with psychological processes such as projection, introjection and condensation. This derealization of space extends from buildings to objects of everyday use and includes a theatricalization of performance through exaggerated gestures and facial expressions and highly choreographed body movements. The fact that modern techniques are turned into tools for escaping into pre-industrial, pre-modern worlds only underscores the precarious position of the Expressionist film in relation to tradition, modernity, and myth. The resultant fantasy effects attest to the power of the Expressionist vision to articulate and overcome the discursive divisions (for example, subject vs. object, interior vs. exterior) that give rise to its contradictory nature. Because of these qualities, the films must be described as simultaneously subversive and normative, original and derivative, and populist and elitist. Of course, this essentially antagonistic structure and the available strategies of reconciliation made Expressionism ideally suited to the articulation of a widespread ambivalence, shared by Weimar filmmakers and their audiences, toward modern mass culture.

Translated into the creative process, the encounter between film and Expressionism took essentially two directions: on the one hand, novelists, poets, and dramatists felt compelled by the cinema into reflecting on the future of literature in the age of modern mass media; on the other, filmmakers incorporated elements from the other arts in order to distinguish their own work from conventional films. Since the prewar years, the literary responses to the cinema had been closely associated with the Expressionist movement (Vietta; Žmegač). Known as the *Kinodebatte* (cinema debate), these polemical writings on the cinema investigated the artistic qualities of the silent film and the social rituals of movie-going (Hake, 61–88). Yet the heated arguments also served to hide deeper concerns, not only about the intense competition over audiences between literature and film but also about the radical transformation of the bourgeois public sphere through new visual sensibilities and popular entertainments. In the *Kientopp* (nickleodeon), writers and intellectuals had to confront the

specter of social leveling and cultural decline — and they did so by simultaneously extolling the powers of visual pleasure and projecting their own fears about a decline of high culture onto the movie audience, which they saw as an embodiment of modern mass society. Thus Alfred Döblin declared that “man nehme dem Volk und der Jugend nicht die Schundliteratur noch den Kientopp; sie brauchen die sehr blutige Kost ohne die breite Mehlpampe der volkstümlichen Literatur und die wässerigen Aufgüsse der Moral. Der Höhergebildete aber verläßt das Lokal, vor allem froh, daß das Kinema — schweigt” (one shouldn't deprive the masses of trashy novels and films. They need this bloody diet more than the indigestible gruel of folk literature and the watery brew created under the pretense of moral uplift. But the better-educated will leave the premises, most of all happy that the movies — are silent; Kaes 1978, 38).

Meanwhile, a number of Expressionist writers rediscovered in the cinema key features of literary modernity, including an affinity for the big city with its dangers and attractions. In the cult of movement, the acceptance of fragmentation, and the emphasis on vision, the new medium already seemed to practice what these writers sought to capture in their poems and plays — namely, the essence of modernity. Thus Jakob van Hoddis and Alfred Lichtenstein introduced the possibilities of montage into lyric poetry, creating a style alternately referred to as “three-second style,” “telegram style,” or “cinema style” (*Kinostil*). Prose authors like René Schickele enlisted the camera as a model of narration capable of addressing the problem of alienation through its detached perspective. Dramatists like Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser thematized the drama of the modern mass individual through filmic scenarios of looking, with Kaiser's neologism *Kinoismus* validating film as a model for new aesthetic experiences.

However, when it came to writing scenarios for the film industry, most authors remained unwilling to abandon their initial hopes about film's re-enchantment of the world in favor of the anti-naturalist and anti-impressionist tendencies that had given rise to the Expressionist movement during the 1910s. Thus the tension between “Abstraktion und Einfühlung” (abstraction and empathy), to cite the title of the influential 1908 art-historical study by Wilhelm Worringer (discussed in greater detail in the introduction by Neil H. Donahue), yielded very different results in Expressionist theater and film. The drama of interiority liberated the modern stage from the constraints of convention; on the screen, the same approach often looked forced and derivative. Only *Das Kinobuch* (The Cinema Book, 1913) allowed for a more creative involvement with the filmic medium. Following a suggestion by Kurt Pinthus, several young writers, including Walter Hasenclever, Else Lasker-Schüler, Max Brod, and Arnold Höllriegel, contributed their scenarios to his anthology, convinced that “wir können das Kino (trotzdem es ein Feind der höheren Kunst ist) nicht bekämpfen” (we must not fight the cinema [even though it is the

enemy of high art]; Pinthus, 24). In exploring alternatives to the static film drama, many of these writers called for more fast-paced stories and fantastic visual effects. For them, the artistic potential of film hinged entirely on the creative possibilities of movement and speed; the difference from actual Expressionist films could not have been greater.

While the early literary responses to the cinema are inseparable from the larger social and cultural debates of the Wilhelminian period, the filmic appropriation of Expressionism reflects above all the intense economic pressures on film studios during the Weimar years. Institutional concerns stood behind both the popularization of Expressionist drama during a prolonged crisis in bourgeois theater and the promotion of art film at a crucial point in the embourgeoisement of cinema. However, its relationship to the Expressionist drama cannot be reduced to simple patterns of influence but must be explained through more complicated processes of incorporation and transformation. A direct transfer from stage to screen occurred only once, in *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, the adaptation of the famous Kaiser play by theater director Karlheinz Martin. Clear patterns of influence remained limited to the kind of thematic concerns shared by Kaiser's *Gas I* and *Gas II* and *Metropolis*. The Expressionist film's debt to the Expressionist drama remained most pronounced in the preference for emotional archetypes (for example, the Son, the Father, the Woman) but rarely extended to the latter's vitalist tendencies. The representation of the crisis of male subjectivity through the allure of the big city, the threat of female sexuality, and the oppressive nature of family life owed much to Expressionist drama but also found plenty of inspiration in naturalism and its strong emphasis on milieu as a determining factor in identity formation.

However, the influence of modern theatre productions on the staging conventions and acting styles of the Expressionist film was indeed considerable and can be traced quite easily. Innovative directors achieved a radical expansion of the proscenium stage through two equally important strategies: greater abstraction (for example, dark backdrops and flat spaces, highly symbolic use of objects, graphic approach to sets and costumes) and greater expressiveness (for example, through exaggerated gestures and movements). Many of these experiments were first tested in Berlin, the center of the German film industry and theatrical world. Two stage producers, Max Reinhardt of the Deutsche Theater and Leopold Jessner of the Staatstheater, exerted a strong influence on Expressionist filmmakers through their approach to lighting and set design, their emphasis on good acting, and their own, perhaps less noteworthy, directorial efforts. After *Hintertreppe* (Backstairs, 1921), a naturalistic milieu study with Henny Porten, Jessner directed *Erdgeist* (Earth Spirit, 1923), a disappointing adaptation of the famous Wedekind play despite the casting of Asta Nielsen in the title role. Reinhardt, who tried directing several times, had a much

more lasting effect through his work with famous actors like Werner Krauß, Fritz Kortner, and Emil Jannings. Known for their intensely physical style, they performed the much-discussed crisis of male subjectivity through a double strategy of externalization and internalization that proved equally effective on the stage and the screen. Their masculine physiognomies, body types, gestural codes, and performance styles confirmed their close ties to the Expressionist movement of the prewar years. But as evident in the screen personas of younger actors like Ernst Deutsch, Conrad Veidt, and, later, Peter Lorre, the Expressionist film also provided a space for a more contemporary body consciousness articulated in the aesthetic registers of indeterminacy and ambiguity.

The emphasis on the body as the site of an ongoing struggle for authenticity and truth distinguishes the performance style of Expressionism's leading actors from the more realistic styles of their contemporaries and draws attention to the productive influence of the modern dance movement on the conventions of dramatic acting during the 1920s. These influences harked back to early stage experiments with stage pantomime (for example, by Reinhardt). Additional impulses came from the modern dance movement as personified by dancer/teacher Mary Wigman, the main representative of German *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance). Such widespread interest in the ritualistic aspects of performance resonated in the anti-psychological styles that distinguished the leading Expressionist actors from the popular film stars appearing in conventional comedies and melodramas. More problematic applications of that difference surfaced in what might be called Expressionism's fascination with the gestural code of Germanness and its utilization in the representation of German national identity and its Others (for example, in the allusions to Jewishness).

The relationship between Expressionist film and architecture must be approached through a similar distinction between direct influences and general affinities. A few architects associated with the Expressionist movement developed an active interest in the cinema, most notably Hans Poelzig, who built the cavernous spaces of Berlin's Große Schauspielhaus in 1919 and who worked on the 1920 production of *Der Golem* (Reichmann 1997a). Set designer Paul Leni came to the cinema under the influence of Expressionist art and, in his later films, focused on mise-en-scène as a primary site of aesthetic experimentation (Bock). Eschewing the more radical aspects of Expressionist architecture, film architects preferred to work in a highly eclectic manner, combining the typical organic shapes and forms with select elements taken from *Jugendstil* and *Werkbund* design as well as *Gründerzeit* historicism. These heterogeneous influences found a perfect model of integration in a conception of filmic space that resisted established notions of verisimilitude and, instead, made productive use of the oscillation between the real and the imagined, the filmic and the theatrical, and the painterly and the architectural (Kessler).

Similar factors account for the lack of a discernible connection between Expressionist painting and film. All three set designers working on *Caligari* had a background in painting. Yet the career of Walter Reimann suggests closer affinities between Expressionist set design and late nineteenth-century painting (Reichmann 1997b). Often-cited elements of Expressionist filmmaking such as oblique angles, false perspectives, graphic distortions, and the selective addition of color (for example, in the choice of tints) bear only a superficial resemblance to the signature style of, say, Lionel Feininger or George Grosz. Yet despite their different formal strategies, painters and filmmakers were responding to the same dramatic transformation of space, place, and identity as a result of the new technologies of mass transportation and mass communication and the accelerated processes of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. But whereas Expressionist painters embraced fragmentation and abstraction as an integral part of the modern condition, for instance by celebrating simultaneity and contingency, filmmakers used the technical possibilities of film to diagnose the crisis of modern subjectivity through a nineteenth-century tradition of the fantastic and the daemonic.

In a similar way, Weimar's leading cinematographers relied on pre-cinematic technologies of vision (for example, camera obscura, shadow play, panorama) as well as new advances in camera design and technology (for example, Karl Freund's "unleashed camera"). Aside from Freund, who worked on several Murnau films, this highly qualified group included Carl Hoffmann (*Von morgens bis mitternachts* and *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*), Fritz Arno Wagner (*Schatten*), and Guido Seeber (*Sylvester*). Many film histories credit the Expressionist film for cultivating the art of chiaroscuro lighting, which distinguishes foreground and background and highlights figures and objects, and, in so doing, animates and mobilizes narrative space. The dramatic interplay of light and darkness is often used to establish conceptual pairs such as conscious vs. unconscious, spiritual vs. physical, and, rather predictably, good vs. evil. All of these oppositions infuse the thematic preoccupations of the Expressionist film with heightened psychological relevance (Franklin). Of course, similar lighting techniques had appeared already in the Danish melodramas, as well as in the fantastic films by Wegener and Galeen. Yet the enlistment of lighting in the creation of highly artistic and, by extension, self-reflexive effects must be considered unique to the Expressionist film.

In the Expressionist cinema, the camera performed two equally important functions. Working against the spatial divisions established by the theater, cinematographers sought to incorporate the painted backdrops into the uniquely filmic mise-en-scènes created through unusual framing, high- and low-angle shots, and extreme close-ups. Aided by sophisticated editing techniques (for example, iris-in/out, superimposition, associative montage), skilled practitioners like Freund and Hoffmann achieved the radical

expansion of narrative space through greater camera movement. The actors were integrated into the artificial settings through shadows and silhouettes that emphasized their bodies' visual rather than corporeal qualities. Cinematographers often turned to the fantastic, with its many references to visions, nightmares, and hallucinations and its acute awareness of narrative ambiguity and visual uncertainty in order to bring together the incompatible forces that constituted the larger field of vision in the Expressionist film.

All of these patterns of influence came together in the three film genres usually mentioned in conjunction with Expressionism's thematic preferences: the fantastic film, the chamberplay film, and the street film. All genres played a key role in the self-presentation of German cinema as a national cinema and an art cinema, and all participated equally in the transition from the dramatic conventions of the 1910s to the narrative conventions of the 1920s. The origins of the fantastic film reached back to the wave of *Autorenfilme* started by Max Mack's *Der Andere* (The Other, 1912), an adaptation of Paul Lindau's famous *Doppelgänger* play. While the fascination with split consciousness in the fantastic film confirmed the close affinities between Romanticism and Expressionism, the visual representation of doubling more frequently resembled the sensationalist styles of the trivial novel. This mixture of high and low culture forms was perfected in several contributions that explored the supernatural, the miraculous, the fantastic, and the uncanny through the visual and narrative conventions of Gothic horror, folklore, and mythology; here the debt to the literary fairytale cannot be underestimated (Jörg). To give only a few examples, the motif of the double was central to Stellan Rye's 1913 adaptation of *Der Student von Prag*, with Wegener in the title role, and to the eponymous 1926 version by Galeen starring Veidt. The mythical Jewish figure of the Golem inspired the early *Golem* films (1914 and 1917) and the famous 1920 remake by Galeen and Wegener. An interest in questions of artificial life first inspired Otto Rippert's six-part serial *Homunculus* (1916) and returned, more elaborately, in *Orlacs Hände* and the various *Alraune* adaptations. Finally, the problem of modern technology linked a virtually unknown work like *Algol* to the most famous film of the period, *Metropolis*, and thus established the conditions for all later transfers between the fantastic and the science fiction film.

Continuing in the tradition of early melodrama, the chamberplay films used extreme limitations of time, place, and characters to address the problem of modern subjectivity from the perspective of the domestic sphere (Risholm). But again the Expressionist fascination with oedipal scenarios was mediated through a wide range of other influences. Inspired by the psycho-sexual explorations of August Strindberg and Frank Wedekind, *Genuine* used the figure of the femme fatale to evoke a morbid turn-of-the-century atmosphere of wealth, luxury, and degeneracy. Naturalist

theories of milieu prevailed in the claustrophobic petty-bourgeois interiors of *Scherben*, which depicts the disintegration of a mother-father-daughter triad after the arrival of a stranger, and *Sylvester*, which narrates the self-destruction of a young man caught between his wife and mother. A more critical approach to the excesses of the imagination distinguishes the episodic narratives of *Schatten*, an exploration of unconscious desires in the format of a shadow play, and *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, a reflection on madness and tyranny inspired by the popular cabinet of horrors. Expressionist staging and lighting conventions prevail whenever the problem of sexuality assumes center stage: namely, as the main problem in the patriarchal family and, by extension, in traditional society and as a powerful cipher for the irrational forces threatening the rule of reason in modern civilization. However, to what degree the chamberplay genre constructs its psychological interiors irrespective of any formal considerations can be seen in borderline cases such as Arthur von Gerlach's *Die Chronik von Grieshuus* (The Chronicle of Grieshuus, 1925) with its unique combination of Naturalist, Symbolist, and Expressionist elements.

Whereas the chamberplay films used Expressionist elements in formal reflections on the powers of the private sphere, the street films built on the tradition of social critique begun by Naturalist dramas to explore the connection between the spaces of the modern metropolis and the changing topographies of gender and class. The simultaneous shift from the classical Expressionism embodied by *Caligari* to what Eisner calls "stylized naturalism" started with *Hintertreppe*, which presents a female servant's romantic delusions with an acute awareness of the oppressive living conditions of the urban poor and without the comparative social typology found in the earlier *Vordertreppe — Hintertreppe* (Front Stairs, Backstairs, 1915). The spatial division between public and private spheres and the equation of the big city with dangerous sexualities (for example, in the figure of the prostitute) still prevailed in early street films like *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923), directed by Karl Grune. Later street films took a more critical approach to the Expressionist topos of the big city as "whore Babylon" and, as evident in Pabst's *Die freudlose Gasse* (Joyless Street, 1925), paid greater attention to social problems such as unemployment, poverty, crime, and exploitation. This trend toward social realism culminated in the city symphonies of the late 1920s and continued in the few examples of working-class filmmaking from the early 1930s.

With the rise of the sound film, the Expressionist vision in the cinema lost its aesthetic, social, and economic relevance and, finally, became part of world cinema. This process began with the first wave of emigration during the 1920s that, among others, brought Paul Leni to Hollywood to turn *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) into an Expressionist murder mystery. The work of Edgar Ulmer on *The Black Cat* (1935) and other classics of the horror genre contributed to the subsequent association of

Expressionism with the underside of mainstream society and the dark world of drives and instincts. The second wave of emigration after 1933 completed the transfer of Expressionist elements into established Hollywood genres and, during the 1940s and 1950s, gave rise to the pessimistic, cynical, and often intensely violent visions of modern life later categorized as “film noir.” Famous exiled directors working in the noir mode included Fritz Lang, who obsessively mapped the urban scene of violence, power, and destiny from *Ministry of Fear* (1945) to *While the City Sleeps* (1956), and Robert Siodmak, who staged claustrophobic interiors of fear and desire in *The Dark Mirror* (1946) and *The Spiral Staircase* (1945).

The trajectory from Expressionist film to film noir continues to be a subject of scholarly controversy (Elsaesser 1996a). Some scholars have emphasized the contribution of German directors, actors, and cinematographers to the thematic and stylistic concerns of the American film noir, including its preoccupation with a dangerous female sexuality (Wager, 19–69). Others have used the exile experience to link Expressionism and film noir through their shared reenactment of the sense of dissociation and displacement inherent in the condition of modernity. Such approaches have generated sweeping historical overviews that give Weimar cinema a central place in the genealogy of the horror film (Prawer, 165–200) and find an Expressionist influence whenever there is some degree of distortion in the field of vision (Barlow). Equally ambitious has been the supposition of certain affective affinities, via the trope of modernity as horror, between the silent cinema of Expressionism and the aesthetics of silence in the expressive modernism of Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, and others (Coates). No matter how problematic these readings may be, it cannot be denied that the label “Expressionist” has become ubiquitous in descriptions of films that cultivate the aesthetics of alienation without necessarily partaking in the discourses that initially gave form to these stylistic features. But this is a question both of historical reception or, rather, receptions and of the contemporary re-readings produced with different intentions by audiences, critics, and filmmakers.

It is as part of these international patterns of reception that the Expressionist film continues to function as an important reference point in the ongoing transformations of German cinema since the postwar years. As far back as the early rubble films and antifascist films produced by the East German DEFA studio, filmmakers repeatedly used chiaroscuro lighting and object symbolism to reconnect to the legacies of Weimar culture, including its utopian vision of a progressive mass culture. Later, in the context of New German Cinema, Werner Herzog paid homage to Murnau with *Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht* (1978, released in the U.S. as *Nosferatu*) and, in so doing, expanded the possibilities of the new *Autorenfilm* toward the Romantic traditions of the sublime. Again with very different intentions, gay activist filmmaker Rosa von

Praunheim presented, in *Anita, Tänze des Lasters* (Anita, Dances of Vice, 1987), a persiflage of the *Caligari* style that celebrated Expressionism as one of the filmic styles most easily adaptable to postmodern strategies of citation and simulation. All of these examples — the number of films with a vaguely expressionistic sensibility is much larger and would include recent work by Oskar Roehler — confirm that the historical encounter between film and Expressionism still resists easy explanations. But it also shows that the Expressionist vision in the cinema continues to provide a space of textual ambiguity that raises provocative questions about the limits of representation and interpretation and the limitlessness of desire and the imagination.

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