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Shell shock cinema: A discussion with Anton Kaes

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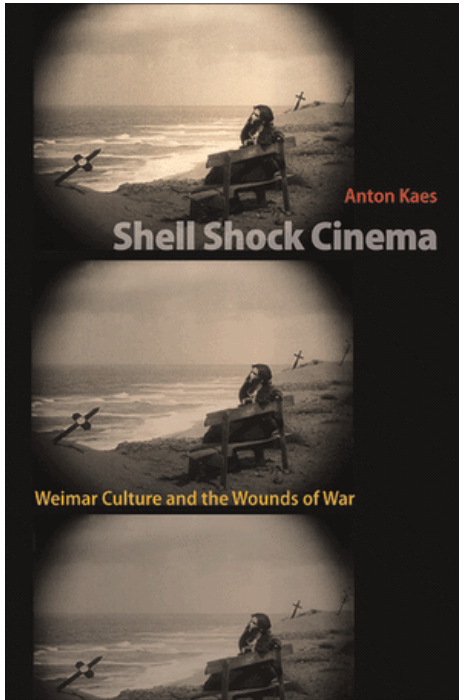
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Anton Kaes is the Class of 1939 Professor of German and Film & Media at the University of California, Berkeley. He has authored a number of fascinating books, placing films and related discourses within a broader frame: the confrontation of German literati with cinema in the early 20th century, the contradictory relationship of German cinema with national history, and the impact of migration on German identity are only some of the many subjects that Kaes has written on.

Recently, Kaes published a book on the legacy of the First World War in Weimar cinema: *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton University Press, 2009). This book accounts for a complex network of discourses that the war elicited – psychiatric, memorial, racial, mythic, allegorical – and makes the argument that war trauma lies at the center of four masterpieces of Weimar cinema: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *Die Nibelungen* (Fritz Lang, 1924), and *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927). The following conversation with Kaes comes as NECSUS contemplates the relationship between war and media.

Pitassio: Let me start with a general question. We are now in the middle of the centenary of the First World War, and the media coverage is impressive: archival sources, retrospectives, books, and research projects are emerging all over Europe and elsewhere. What is your opinion on this proliferation of events and materials, and what is the place of cinema in such a commemorative scene?

Kaes: I have noticed that most of the recent books and exhibitions on the Great War are more concerned with military and diplomatic history than with cultural history. Unsurprisingly, the most popular war books



in 2014 have focused on 1914 and the origins and multiple causes of a global war that mobilised 65 million men worldwide, claimed nine million lives, and resulted in the collapse of four empires. There have been only a few new contributions from the cultural sphere, such as Geert Buelens' sourcebook on the bellicose writings of European poets and thinkers before and during the war¹ – a sobering document of collective madness.

To my knowledge, no major book on cinema's role in the First World War has yet appeared in the wave of war titles in the centenary year. However, there is a good chance for new and exciting work ahead. On the occasion of the centenary, film archives have digitised their holdings of war-related films and made them accessible online. The most remarkable undertaking in this respect is the European Film Gateway project on the First World War <project.efg1914.eu>, which marks the unprecedented collaboration of 30 film archives across Europe over two years. The website contains at present 2,900 historical films from and about the First World War. This translates into an astounding 740 hours of film – mostly documentary and propaganda, but also feature-length films. Berlin's Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv has recently uploaded 110 films (or 20 hours) that deal with the First World War,² and it was reported

that the BBC plans to devote 2,500 programming hours to commemorate the First World War over the next four years. In addition, we can draw from an ever-expanding collection of microfilmed or digitised film journals, trade papers, and daily newspapers, which often include film reviews. This flood of new primary sources is bound to change the material base of our research and teaching, particularly since the study of cinema today encompasses newsreels, advertising, medical, instructional, and other nonfiction films.

Pitassio: With regard to the European Film Gateway project on the First World War, we might say that it resonates with Pierre Nora's notion of a heritage-memory, rooted in historical consciousness and belonging to contemporaneity, as opposed to modern societies' memorial consciousness based on narratives of continuity. Somehow an archival project offering a terrific amount of material from many national archives fits very well with the reduction of historical depth and the rise of post-national entities.

Kaes: Yes, I too wonder if this multi-national archival project co-funded by the European Union displays a common film heritage in order to create and shape a European identity that transcends national borders. The project reminds me of the Museum of Modern Art's famous *The Family of Man* exhibition of 1955, which featured 500 photographs from many nations that emphasised *universal* experiences and values at the height of the Cold War. Is the EFG 1914 project an indirect assertion of a collective *European* responsibility for the human tragedy of the First World War? As Christopher Clark in his recent book, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, has controversially argued, the guilt for starting the war does not rest with Germany alone. Regardless of the political motivations behind this mega-project, the sheer abundance of readily available historical film documents provides a huge opportunity for comparative research.

Pitassio: I would like to move on to cinema and the culture of trauma. In recent scholarship, trauma has come to connote the impossibility of narration, an obstacle to a coherent and consistent storytelling. In Cathy Caruth's words, 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event'.³ In your seminal work you seem to address what we might term 'dislocated narratives': world-renowned masterpieces of Weimar cinema not explicitly addressing the war experience but rather

re-working a number of issues produced and defined through that experience in a fictional world. I was wondering whether these narratives dislocate their topic from war to elsewhere because of the obstacles faced by direct storytelling, or if some obsessive images generate alternative modes of storytelling?

Kaes: If I understand your question correctly, yes, a traumatic event necessarily interrupts narrative continuity by blocking linear storytelling. This is what Walter Benjamin meant when he remarked in 'The Storyteller' that people coming home from the front were unable to recount their experiences. The films that intrigue me most in this respect are those that try to enact this traumatic experience on a formal level. For instance, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* uses a desolate set, distorted angles, and a deliberately fractured narrative that adds further twists to the hallucinatory story-within-the-story. The recovery of the traumatic event (the murder of the protagonist's friend) employs techniques of displacement, projection, and association. Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Lang's *Nibelungen* also use frame narratives that constantly break the flow of the storyline. It is important to stress that these shell shock films rarely reference the war experience directly (there are no images of trenches, explosions, combat), but instead draw on what Freud called 'secondary trauma', which assumes that one can be affected by a traumatic event even if one has not experienced it firsthand. As for film, I do not argue that the trauma of the war caused or forced the break-up of all linear storytelling, though I do claim that certain films at the time sought to find a new medium-specific language to express the experience of trauma. It was a modernist language shared with the other arts, particularly expressionist painting, architecture, and stagecraft. It is also noteworthy that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* opened within a few months of the First International Dada Exhibition, which shocked the public with its anti-war message and mockery of artistic conventions. This brings up the question about the relationship between trauma and the fever dream to represent it in the symbolic realm.

Pitassio: Could we perhaps hypothesise that 'secondary trauma' leaves space for storytelling, but that this requires alternative forms of re-enactment that are themselves secondary, whereas primary trauma very often turns to silence or to a problematic condition of enunciation and testimony?

Kaes: I would agree with you. Of course, a fictional representation of trauma in film is always already the record of an imagined (secondary) trauma. Films like *Caligari* emphasise this by having one of the protagonists say in the beginning, 'I will tell you.' We can only know the remembered and narrated *story* of the event, not the event itself. This flashback convention is also used in later *films noirs*, for instance *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) or *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), which feature traumatised characters looking back and trying to make sense of the past traumatic event.

Pitassio: Siegfried Kracauer's work is a point of departure for your research. Kracauer shed light on the relevance of visual motifs as a privileged point of entry into the collective unconscious. Do you consider traumatic images to be visual motifs in Weimar cinema? Would you describe traumatic images as crucial even today, in a cultural scene inundated with such images?

Kaes: It seems to me that the Kracauer of the *Caligari* book is in fact relatively little concerned with the image per se. Instead he tends to shift between summarising the films' narratives and addressing questions of genre and ideology to illustrate his strong teleological thesis of an inevitable trajectory from *Caligari* to Hitler. (This backshadowing interprets open-ended history in light of its outcome.) In contrast, I am advocating an understanding of Weimar films as complex aesthetic responses to their historical moments. I thus concentrate on just a handful of films and treat each film text as a site of contradictory fullness – I strongly believe that films never carry a single message but are rather fractured constructs that must be closely analysed, like the unconscious, not only by means of their omissions and silences but with an emphasis on contradictions and unrealised possibilities that lie dormant in the texts.

Similar close readings of other films from the Weimar era will unveil the presence of trauma both on the visual and narrative level. In my opinion, Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) would absolutely qualify as a shell shock film. In fact, one can surmise that in 1931, Beckert (played by Peter Lorre) was recognised as a shell-shocked war veteran who had spent some time in a mental hospital (the film features a close-up of the letterhead of his hospital). Like thousands of other shell-shocked soldiers in Germany he was released with a small pension, unable to hold down a job, and suffering from a mental condition – in his case the compulsion to kill

and kill again, against his will: 'Will nicht. Muss. Will nicht. Muss', as he claims in his monologue in the trial scene. Carrying death and destruction from the battlefield into civilian life also become a frequent motif in many films at the end of the Second World War. Kracauer saw this connection with great foresight in his 1946 essay 'Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?' It bears noting that his examination of American 'terror films' (later to be called 'film noir') in the shadow of the Second World War resembled his analysis of Weimar cinema after 1918. In fact, when he wrote this essay he was finishing his *Caligari* book and working through the question of how expressionist films reflected a *German* 'state of mind'.

Pitassio: In your work you propose the notion of *shell shock cinema*, which focuses 'on loss and grief – experiences that resonate against a background of shared wartime memories'⁴. Furthermore, you discuss the role that specific film genres, e.g. melodrama, had in providing an apt form for such memories. Do you consider the melodramatic imagination specific to postwar production in Germany or as related to trauma culture overall?

Kaes: There is no question that melodrama (more than comedy, for instance) was considered the most adequate filmic mode in which trauma could be articulated. It was not unusual that large political conflicts were translated into family conflicts of melodrama. At the same time we need to acknowledge the wide variety of filmic genres and modes that can be found in 1920, for example, when more than 500 films were produced in Germany alone. In addition, the lost war was not the only traumatic event – in Germany it was bound up with the 1918 flu pandemic that killed far more people worldwide than the war, as well as the political turmoil of 1918-1919. A film such as Robert Reinert's *Nerven* (1919) intertwines motifs of shell shock with those of the failed workers' revolution.

Pitassio: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a new technology of the self emerged thanks to medical culture. As you suggest, some major contributions such as Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) bear the signs of war experience. In your opinion, how much is *shell shock cinema* indebted to new paradigms that emerged in the sciences and humanities? How much does trauma culture owe to scientific discussion?

Kaes: I think the boundaries between science and the humanities were less strict at that time than they appear to be now. Many doctors and psychiatrists participated in the early debates about cinema and wrote about ways in which film could record abnormal behavior. In 1910 the psychiatrist Hans Hennes proudly reported that he could make films of his mental patients and use them for teaching purposes. He added that in this way he could eliminate the unexpected antics that hysterics often performed when exhibited to students in the lecture hall. We have medical films of shell shock patients treated by war psychiatrists, who – like Dr. Caligari – were considered inhuman and murderous (especially in the case of malingerers). It is known that several patients died after electro-shock therapy. Given the well-publicised hatred of war psychiatrists (an article from 1920 indicates that one psychiatrist was physically assaulted in the street by a former patient, it is telling that, close to the end of the film, Francis attacks Dr. Caligari in the courtyard of the insane asylum. I believe that archival research into the period allows us to see references in these films that would otherwise go undetected. For instance, the more we know about the status and nature of war psychiatry in 1919 the more a film from that period will resonate for us today. Similarly, the more we engage in close formal readings the more history will be unearthed. Or, as Roland Barthes once said: ‘[a] little formalism turns one away from history, but a lot brings one back to it.’¹⁵

Pitassio: This is a very interesting point. What is the relevance of medical films for trauma culture and psychiatry? In its early years cinema was used as a medical tool. This huge production still demands to be thoroughly scrutinised, possibly on a comparative level. In your opinion, how much does this kind of production shed light on fictional film-making?

Kaes: I agree that more research needs to be done on the relationship between medical films and feature films. There is a growing availability of medical films (for instance, the Wellcome Institute’s medical videos on YouTube) and of instructional films, industry films, advertising films, etc.; but the influence is bi-directional. For instance, John Huston’s *Let There Be Light* (1945), a documentary about shell-shocked veterans of the Second World War, shows how fictional film conventions add an affective quality to the medical film. The whole *Kulturfilm* tradition of Weimar cinema is based on the mutual illumination of science and the cultural realm

Pitassio: You highlight Ufa's connections to military headquarters and propaganda and address the relevance of technology and its effects on German culture in the contradictory transition to modernity. Most of the films you discuss make self-reflexive use of technology (*Nosferatu*, *Metropolis*), as do many other cinematic masterworks of the decade. Do you see a connection between a functional national role for cinema and the mastering of technology? Can we trace a similar lineage from propaganda to national production in any other nation involved in the First World War?

Kaes: I believe that the German High Command realised the potential of technical media for propaganda fairly late. From the beginning of the war the Allies had used film to sway public opinion in the neutral countries. It seemed that Germany's ambivalent attitude toward film as a serious threat not only to high culture but also to the bourgeois class itself caused this delay in utilising the trivial, plebeian mass medium for the noble national cause. In late 1917, following Erich Ludendorff's famous letter to the Royal War Ministry, a concerted effort was made to consolidate the scattered small film production companies across Germany into a big, nationally funded conglomerate called the Universum Film AG, or Ufa, to produce films that projected positive images of the German nation to the world. It was too late to save the war, but Ufa became a major force that assembled the best actors and latest technologies to compete on the world market. I am certain that no other national film industry in Europe emerged so clearly as part of the war effort.

Pitassio: You refer to the 'spirit of 1914', which presented warfare as an experience outdoing modern (and modernist) fragmentation. However, many Weimar films showcase fragmented narratives and visual styles. Do you consider these features as specifically related to Weimar trauma culture, recovering from the wounds of war by contextualising it as an organic and liberating experience?

Kaes: I think the 'spirit of 1914' was a relatively short-lived phenomenon. It may have provided a momentary sense of national fervor but it faded over time, especially as it became clear that the war would not be over by Christmas 1914. The film reviews from the first few months of the war do speak of a communal experience (with frequent singing of the national anthem) whenever newsreels of the German army were shown

as part of the regular film programs. It is unlikely that a modernist film like *Caligari* would elicit patriotic reactions.

Pitassio: In his posthumously published work on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs prioritises collective over individual memory.⁶ Halbwachs also assumes a multiplicity of collective memories as related to different social groups. Would you say that film productions explicitly referring to the First World War, like those discussed in Bernadette Kester's *Film Front Weimar: Representations of the First World War in German Films of the Weimar Period (1919-1933)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003) and the works you examine represent different memories as tied to disparate social groups?

Kaes: Documentary war films and combat films (including antiwar films from the end of the Weimar Republic) are likely to have drawn different publics from that of *Caligari* or *Nosferatu*, which do not show images of dying soldiers in the trenches and other images that have seared themselves into the collective memory across the world. Shell shock films do not represent the traumatic event, but rather its aftermath; by definition, the shock itself cannot be fully comprehended or represented. For instance, the war front is not shown once in *Caligari* or *M*, but the psychological effects of that experience constitute the secret center of these films. As to your question about different memories for different social groups, it would be hard to disagree. However, to do such a reception study one would need more empirical data about the audiences, about where these films were playing and how they were marketed and advertised. At the same time, I see limitations for such empirical research into group memories. Does it not also depend on the distinctions among the spectators according to class, gender, race, age, geography, social and educational background, etc.? In short, although different films may activate different memories, we may be able to assume, upon looking at the large amount of records from various sources and from a distance in time, some sense of a shared memory, even though we know that the concept of 'collective memory' will ultimately always remain a cultural construct.

Pitassio: Would you consider postwar German cinema, with its scattered and often-disorienting representations of time, as the outcome of a major transformation within social groups? What kind of *shell shock cinema* did the Second World War produce in Germany and elsewhere?

Kaes: I think that much of American film noir (its disillusionment and death drive, its ruthless violence and paranoia, and its self-questioning nihilism) works through the trauma of the Second World War. Some films are shell shock films – not only in the narrow sense of featuring returning soldiers suffering from shell shock but also in the wider sense of traumatised veterans bringing the war experience home with them by transforming cities into urban battlefields. (I believe that trauma is contagious: it does not just affect the victim but also the victim's family, community, and society at large.) In Germany, after 1945, one may find classic shell shock cinema in films like Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are Among Us, 1946) and Peter Lorre's *Der Verlorene* (The Lost One, 1951).

Pitassio: After the Second World War the so-called 'era of the witness' slowly emerged. In your opinion, does shell shock cinema of the 1920s place witnessing characters at its core, or does it imply a different kind of subjectivity?

Kaes: In many ways the First World War was different from any other. It was a war whose origins were murky (and are still fiercely debated today), and its end was not clearly marked by one final battle or the physical destruction of a country. This is the reason why after the War even the Social Democrats maintained that the German army was undefeated in the field. This situation also gave rise to a wide range of revisionist writings (the entire German leadership wrote autobiographies within a year or two), including the stab-in-the-back myth, which the Nazis used to persecute Leftists and Jews. Among the myriad causes of the rise of Hitler, the Great War and its political, economic, and psychological consequences seem to be the most potent (and underestimated) forces. I would argue that the experience of that brutal war (with unprecedented and unimaginable casualties in the hundreds of thousands per battle) did not lend itself to immediate and unmediated representation. Shell shock cinema does not feature witnessing characters but instead bears witness to pain and horror as ciphers of the war experience; it also highlights the paradox of the very concept of witnessing (as later addressed by Giorgio Agamben) – i.e. the people who have experienced the full terror of war, assuming they have survived, are generally unable to communicate their experiences. One might call these shell shock films analytical studies about the psychological consequences of war. They use genre conventions (mostly melodrama,

crime, and horror) to reflect on traumatised protagonists unconsciously suffering from the invisible wounds of war.

Pitassio: If the witness is not the pivotal figure in traumatic storytelling, what kind of figure is crucial for expressing First World War trauma? A reliable storyteller is hard to find in a film such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and this blurred function might itself be telling.

Kaes: Exactly. This subjectivisation of a narrative, foregrounding the *telling* of the story, separates these films from other straightforward narrative films that claim direct access to the world. This fictional self-awareness may be one of the reasons why we still find these films fascinating to study. Even though some of their narrative and visual techniques may be found in earlier films, they enact in their very form a radical, 'traumatised' sense of subjective disjointedness and collective anxiety that was felt at the time and that still resonates today.

Pitassio: You highlight the profound difference between literature and film production, as the latter required 'a strict separation between production and reception'. Do you think this distinction is still operative in representing war or is this gap bridged today?

Kaes: There was obviously an enormous difference between shooting a film in the trenches (the huge hand-cranked cameras on tripods could be mistaken for a machine gun) and writing a poem about the trench experience. Today's digital cameras have erased such a difference, but for me the real question is not how to best represent combat action but how to capture and remember the long-term psychological effects of war. Here I see fiction play a role: a narrative film may make us realise, on an affective level, that the war is not over when the fighting stops.

Notes

1. Buelens 2014.
2. See <http://www.filmportal.de/nachrichten/digitale-filmothek-des-bundesarchivs-bietet-20-stunden-filmmaterial-aus-der-zeit-des-ers>.
3. Caruth 1995, pp. 4-5.
4. Kaes 2009, p. 4.
5. Barthes 1973, p. 113.
6. Halbwachs 1980.

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