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## Dietrich Scheunemann (Hg.): Expressionist Film - New Perspectives?

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### Dietrich Scheunemann (Ed.): *Expressionist Film – New Perspectives*

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While praising Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952) for helping to retain German films of the 1920s within the cultural memory, Dietrich Scheunemann, editor of *Expressionist Film – New Perspectives*, also feels that these two books have exercised undue influence on subsequent generations of scholars. Thus, he has assembled this series of articles to "pave the way to a historiography, . . . that places greater emphasis on the complexities of historical and cultural developments and encourages the investigation of nonsynchronous developments and the variety of trends that form the history" (p.x) of early Weimar cinema. Freed of the requirement to subsume their analyses beneath a paradigm that seeks to explain Germany's Nazi past, the authors included in this collection offer an array of studies that reassess both the 'expressionism' of expressionist cinema and identify other artistic styles and trends to be found in films of this period.

Scheunemann opens the first section, "Expressionist Film – Weimar Cinema," with an article that traces how Eisner's and Kracauer's studies have effected reception of Weimar films. According to the author, these two theorists incorrectly classified several works as "expressionist," though he does note that Eisner later came to retract many of her claims, refining and restricting her use of the term to just a few films produced during the first years of the Weimar period. Scheunemann uses contemporaneous material – interviews with directors, reviews, even intertitles – to support his contention that even during the period in question the term 'expressionism' was used sparingly. He argues that while the aesthetic movement may have been short-lived, it established "film as an art form which deserve[d] all the attention of the culturally open-minded middle classes" (p.26), something that both the 'Autorenfilm' and the 'film d'art' failed to do. Thomas Elsaesser meanwhile points to the tension inherent in the simultaneous efforts to legitimate Weimar cinema as an art to the intelligentsia and to satisfy the entertainment needs of a rising bourgeoisie. He examines historical and sociological forces (via apparatus supplied by Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer) surrounding the production of German cinema from 1910 to 1930, concluding that expressionism was actually the product of Romanticism.

In the second section, "Revolution, Crime, and the Uncanny," Marc Silberman reads *Madame Dubarry* (1919) less as an historical drama and more as a vehicle that "can be situated within the rupture and dislocation in postwar Germany of 1919" (p.75). He contends that director Ernst Lubitsch displaces the historical event of the French Revolution, foregrounding instead through cinematic narrative and *mise-en-scène* the shifting power relations of the film's male and female characters, which in turn bespeak modern concerns of gender and national identities. Norbert Grob presents a short treatment of themes and cinematographic

techniques used in Fritz Lang's two-part adventure, *Die Spinnen* (1919-20), before focusing on the early *Dr. Mabuse*-films (1922-1933). He calls attention to the way that Lang stages his preoccupations with a world of pleasure and illusion, beneath the surface of which lies a darker realm of evil obsessions and manipulations. Grob analyzes scenes from the Mabuse films to illustrate Lang's practice of evoking an uncanny reaction from the spectator over mundane objects and situations. A certain irony obtains in his description of the detectives in early crime adventures as "artists of observation and fantasy, elegant in appearance and aristocratic in behavior," who could draw "far-reaching conclusions from small, relatively insignificant details" (p.88). One may equally well apply such attributes to directors Fritz Lang or Friedrich Murnau. Unfortunately, Grob does not pursue this possible seepage of private lives into public aesthetic practice.

Thomas Koebner, on the other hand, in attempting to answer the question of how Friedrich Murnau could have produced almost concurrently two films as dissimilar as *Nosferatu - Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) and *Der brennende Acker* (1922), identifies elements from the director's personal life within both. He examines these films from the standpoints of private and public spheres. Thus, Count Orlock may be seen as an obtruding homoerotic or bisexual element within the affectionate if less than passionate relationship between Hutter and Ellen, whereas the pestilence that he brings with him serves as a "code for the fear of the unstoppable doom that takes hold of everybody" (p.116) in Wisborg. Likewise, Koebner sees in Johannes, the protagonist of *Der brennende Acker*, a site of private and public emotions. The character's inability to form meaningful relationships with women and the ensuing guilt perhaps allude to Murnau's feelings regarding his own homosexuality, whereas Johannes's pursuit of an ill-fated mission may allude to the German experience of the war.

Dietrich Scheunemann opens the third section, "The Art of Expressionist Film," by attempting to reassess long-standing interpretations of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) that have been inflected by Kracauer's "grand narrative" of political historiography. Using the recently-released script of the film, Scheunemann examines what may be genuinely classified as "expressionist". He also investigates Robert Wiene's use of the "Doppelgänger", a literary device, arguing that Caligari and Cesare may be seen as descendants of a long Romantic line that includes E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Sandmann* (1817), Cagliostro and Faust, Frankenstein and William Wilson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Dorian Gray (cf. p.130). Jürgen Kasten tries to explain why commercial distributors originally ignored Karl Heinz Martin's *Von morgens bis Mitternacht* (1920), a filmic adaptation of the Georg Kaiser play. He claims that Martin and co-scriptwriter Herbert Juttke foiled the expectations of critics and others who had seen the play by failing to transpose the motifs and conflict of the original into the new medium. The film also lacked the psychological background that motivated the cashier in the stage version. This critical and spectator fixation with the theatrical proved problematic for the

film's reception in the 1920s, through Kracauer in the 1940s, and even until today. Through close analysis of décor and image, architecture, light effects, costumes, makeup designs, montage, and even the mechanization of character and camera movements, Kasten highlights what he believes to be the film's overlooked contributions to the enrichment of cinema aesthetics. In the paper following, Kasten teases out a nuanced reading of Paul Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (1924). The author does not contradict Kracauer, who classified the film as the last of the "Tyrant Movies," nor other critics who have seen the work as marking the end of certain early Weimar stylistic phenomena and motifs. Instead, he notes how separate factors – a narrative structure that frames three distinct sujets, financial constraints, and the employment of more concentrated lighting systems than were available to earlier producers – all contributed to the film's unique, "disjointed, bric-a-brac character" (p.183). He closes with an indirect challenge to scholars to explain why Leni's later development of such mixed stylization in his American films did not result in interpretations of a "longing for tyrants" that Kracauer had found in the director's German work.

In the fourth section, "The Street, the Vaudeville, and the Power of Cinema," Anthony Coulson pursues the "implications of that fundamental shift in perception and consciousness which accompany[ed] the social and technological changes of modernity" (p.189) in Karl Grune's *Die Straße* (1923) and G. W. Pabst's *Die freudlose Gasse* (1925). In the former work, the protagonist sets out to escape his humdrum existence, stimulated by the cinematic play of lights from the busy street below upon his ceiling. The randomness of his subsequent adventures in the city, his inability to fulfill the role of adventurer that he has projected for himself, and the thematic interplay of vision and surveillance underscore the film's self-referentiality and what the author sees as the "seductive self-deception of a society whose perception of its Other is no more than an unmediated image on the screen" (p.197). Coulson goes on to explore the power relations between the privileged of the city and the impoverished underclass in *Die freudlose Gasse*. He argues that Pabst stages moments of static silence so as to subvert the apparent social order, thereby inducing the spectator to question surface reality. During one such moment, for example, the camera captures the irreconcilableness of Greta Garbo's hope in misfortune and the impossibility of her escape from the situation. Likewise, another static shot undermines the butcher's authority at a tea party, revealing his inability to function appropriately beyond the dungeon-like confines of his shop. Thomas Brandlmeier explores the relativity behind constructions of time and space in E. A. Dupont's *Variété* (1925). For him, the segmentation of space, time, and action through montage and the moveable gaze of the camera mark a "truly revolutionary momentum which has so far been overlooked in the reception of Dupont's films" (p.212). Even simple onscreen activities such as smoking serve to convey domination of space or to demarcate private from public realms by concealing thoughts and emotions from other characters. Fetishism also

assumes a role in the politics of power, such as Boss's fixation upon his wife's leg, whether displayed in bed or at a restaurant. Helmut Schanze reads Friedrich Murnau's *Faust* (1926) as successor to Richard Wagner's Romantic conception of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', while also seeing it within a "set of differences, a deconstruction of lines" (p.224). That is, the short but meticulously researched paper emphasizes the free play of various artistic genres intersecting the film. Turning his attention to the syntax and rhythm of the original film treatment, Schanze points out the cinematographic quality of screenwriter Hans Kyser's work. He also includes a reproduction of the film's advertisement from 1926, observing how the artist adopted a sixteenth-century style of wood block printing to recall the basis of the film story in German myth.

In the fifth and final section, "Avant-Garde Film," Walther Schobert marks the early history of German abstract film through the works of Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, and Viking Eggeling. He opens with a critical passage from a letter by Ruttmann to his sister in 1917, following the trail through the theoretical essays and manifestos of these and various Russian artists, noting with regret that, because of the Nazis' consignment of the movement to that of "degenerate art," avant-garde film had no further German exponents until the 1960s. Finally, David Macrae takes Kracauer to task for his limited interpretation of the relationship between rhythmic montage and the "objective world" in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin - Die Sinfonie der Grossstadt* (1927). He argues that Kracauer's self-confinement to a rigidly idealistic framework of interpretation caused him to overlook the depth of Ruttmann's engagement with, even contribution to, the urban realities of 1920s Berlin. Ultimately, he redeems the theorist by observing that his "view of the ideological predicament facing the society of the time is, itself, a part of that reality" (p.269).

*Expressionist Film - New Perspectives* also contains a filmography of the works covered from 1919 to 1927, a ten-page bibliography, and an index (not always included in such compilations). All of the papers are written in or were translated into English, thus making the volume accessible to film scholars and students not graced with a knowledge of German.

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