**Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism**

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GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST FILM

Expressionist film emerged during the Weimar Republic era (1919-1933), and was most pronounced in a number of films from the early 1920s. The stylistic and thematic concerns of Expressionism are most fully on display in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919/20). Designed by key figures from Expressionist painting and theatre, *Caligari*’s highly stylized sets employ extreme angles, exaggerated proportions, and dizzying visual patterns. The film’s acting, and the wild gesticulations of its twisted bodies lend a sense of the uncanny, while the low-key lighting and off-kilter cinematography gives one the feeling that the film obscures more than it reveals. These elements, in addition to its fantastical plot and macabre themes make *Caligari* the archetypal Expressionist film.

In the aftermath of the First World War, as the laws and traditions of the Prussian monarchs gave way to newfound freedoms, much of German society was undergoing a sexual, artistic, and political reawakening. At the same time, the economic and bodily wreckage of the Great War had a profound impact on the German psyche. New ways of thinking, perceiving, and creating had to be devised. During this time, directors such as Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau, Robert Wiene, Paul Leni, and Karl Heinz Martin drew inspiration from painting, literature, architecture, and theatre associated with Expressionism, which sought to depict the internal and imaginative reality of things rather than their external, ‘objective’ appearance. Expressionist filmmakers also sampled from German fairy tales and Gothic art to realize their fantastical worlds and the doppelgangers, monsters, madmen, and strange visitors to populate them.

In the vast majority of movies made before 1920, naturalism was the rule. Even illusionists like Georges Méliès relied upon frontal perspectives, realistic proportions, and generally stable spatio-temporal coordinates. German Expressionism arrived as the first major *anti-realist* movement in film. Beyond their extreme styles, these films depict stories within stories, performers and spectators, magic and confabulation, mirrors and doubles in a way that thematises spectacle itself, and could remind viewers that they are watching a film. Their overtly synthetic character has lead some critics to accuse Expressionist films of being “embarrassingly fake” (Arnheim), and others to see them as reflexive, ironic, and theatrical (Elsaesser, Telotte). Such a view of Expressionism as self-referential and purposefully unstable aligns it with the project of modernism generally. At the same time, there were undoubtedly economic, industrial, and ideological issues at play in the production of these films. Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa), originally intended by the government as a production studio for WWI-related propaganda, became a major player in Weimar cinema. Erich Pommer of Decla-Film (which eventually merged with Ufa) produced *Caligari* believing that it could become both an artistic and box office success. That bet paid off, and Pommer went on to produce many classics of Expressionism’s heyday and its afterlife, including *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* (1922), *Faust* (1926), *Metropolis* (1927), and *The Blue Angel* (1930).

Two central books have most shaped the conceptualization and legacy of Expressionist film: Lotte Eisner’s *The Haunted Screen,* and Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler*. Each of these books in its own way draws a conceptual link between Expressionist cinema and the rise of National Socialism. Both Eisner and Kracauer were exiled German Jews writing in the decade following the Second World War, and it is important to bear this fact in mind when accounting for their views of Expressionist cinema as a foreshadowing of Nazism. But however much truth one might find in any claim about its *historical* premonitions, Expressionism undeniably anticipated and fundamentally shaped the future of *cinema*. Filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, Paul Leni, and Carl Freund fled Nazi Germany and found work in Hollywood, where they imported Expressionist techniques into American cinema. The influence of Expressionism can be found in the very DNA of genres like film noir and horror, and reaches even further, into the films of Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch, for instance, or the science fiction noirs like *Blade Runner* (1982)and *Dark City* (1998).

References and further reading:

Arnheim, R. (1997) *Film Essays and Criticism*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

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Coates, P. (1991) *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eisner, L. H. (1969) *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Elsaesser, T. (2000) *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, London: Routledge.

Kaes, A. (2009) *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kracauer, S. (1947) *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Telotte, J. P. (2006) “German Expressionism: A Cinematic/Cultural Problem,” In Linda Bradley, et al (eds.) *Traditions in World Cinema* (15-28), New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Wollenberg, H. H. (1972) *Fifty Years of German Film*, New York: Arno Press. (Original work published 1948)

Paratextual Material:

## Exhibitions:

## Harvard Film Archive Exhibition - [“Decadent Shadows: The Cinema of Weimar Germany”](http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2010octdec/weimar.html) (November 27, 2010–December 19, 2010)

## Museum of Modern Art Film Exhibition - [“Weimar Cinema, 1919–1933: Daydreams and Nightmares”](http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/1117) (November 17, 2010–March 7, 2011)

## Videos:

Robert Wiene, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (*Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*) (1919/20):

<https://archive.org/details/thecabinetofdrcaligari>

Karl Heinz Martin, From Morning to Midnight (*Von Morgens Bis Mitternachts*) (1920):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBw3TumvDDE>

Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, The Golem: How He Came Into the World (*Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*), 1920:

<https://archive.org/details/TheGolem_893>

Fritz Lang, Destiny (*Der müde Tod*) (1921):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLv5zcYu8IE>

F.W. Murnau, Nosferatu (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*) (1922):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcyzubFvBsA>

Arthur Robison, Warning Shadows (*Schatten – Eine nächtliche Halluzination*) (1923):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4OcGxE60Gw>

Paul Leni, Waxworks (*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*) (1924):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNTuHjq64RA&list=PLA84A1E3E7A94F1A5>

Fritz Lang, Metropolis (1926):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j92E9J8uafc>

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