Society for Cinema & Media Studies

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Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 17-24
Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225056
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Object-Subject Relationships In German Expressionist Cinema

John S. Titford

Expressionist cinema is an impossibility. Like all art forms which believe that only the subjective, the interior life, is real, it can ultimately never avoid the paradox that for creation to take place, the inner experience must be externalized, and thereby partake of the world of objective reality. Cinema is a phenomenal medium. Expressionists and realists alike can exploit its possibilities, but never transcend its limitations. It must always be mimetic, symbolic, and can never be the thing it represents. As Henry James says of the novel, art must, unlike reality itself, have a beginning and an end. It must also be, in Wordsworth's phrase, "emotion recollected in tranquility," the result of the memory of an experience rather than the experience itself.

Nevertheless, the attempt to simulate inner states of being must be made. Having defined its bounds, it must be said that cinema has proved to be the most appropriate medium for expressionism. It is more dynamic than expressionist painting, more able to instill a feeling of horror than expressionist literature, and more claustrophobic than expressionist theatre. Just as tragedy is embodied most appropriately in drama, or satire in the essay form, so the muse of expressionism found its own articulate exponent, early in the twentieth century, in the new and rapidly evolving art of motion pictures.

Historically, expressionism is a late manifestation of romanticism, which traces its origins back at least as far as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Impressionism was an earlier flowering of the same movement, and expressionism itself only developed as a recognizable form in the early 1900's. Bringing to bear the theories of contemporary philosophical and psychological thinking, in particular those of phenomenology and Freudianism, expressionists attempted to develop an art which represented subjective experience, embracing what was later to become a *sine qua non* of general semantics—the concept that the individual chooses his own reality, by using his senses to abstract from the world in process.

That reality must then again be externalized in the work of art. Recognizing this dichotomy between creation and creator, medium and message, semiologists like Christian Metz have attempted to define the language of cinema by using the precepts of structural linguistics, whereby a differentiation is made between *signifié* and *signifiant*—what is to be signified, and what is to do the signifying. The ultimate signified is the artist's consciousness; the ultimate signifier is celluloid itself. These ideas are by no means new: the English novelist, Thomas De Quincey, was speaking in the nineteenth century of what he calls *involutes*—that is, artistic equivalents for feelings and thoughts which exist within himself. In other words, what is alive (human consciousness) must become dead (a work of art) for communication to take place.

Once we accept the dialectical relationship of life and death, animate and inanimate, it should come as no surprise to find these apparent polarities inextricably related within the works of art themselves. Literature has long been using people to embody inanimate concepts—in allegorical works like Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for example. At the same time it invests inanimate objects with a life of their own, through figures of speech such as metaphor, apostrophe, and especially personification and pathetic fallacy. Tennyson's line, "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white," or John Donne's famous invocation, "Busy old fool, unruly Sun," bring the dead alive, endow the world of static objects with human qualities.

This process—objects becoming alive—is one of anthropomorphism, and is a vital element in German expressionist cinema. The live consciousness of the artist is, in a sense, metamorphosed into dead celluloid. Then, within the film itself, humans frequently take on the characteristics of the world of objects, objects seem to exude a life of their own, and finally the film itself becomes alive again in the minds of the audience. There is a Phoenix-like chain of life and death.

German Expressionist cinema is significant, in the first instance, not because it offers a penetrating analysis of society, nor because of what it has learned from the philosophy or psychology of its age. What gives it its special quality is its concern, directly and indirectly, with the filmic process itself. Most painting and sculpture is static; at least it was so before the advent of pop art and kinetic models; it is patently dead, complete. Cinema, by contrast, succeeds in transforming inert photographic frames into a startlingly convincing semblance of verisimilitude, a quality which makes it a perfect medium for examining object-subject relationships. Using a close-up, for instance, film can make an object assume a personality—the clocks and doors of the German "art" films or the menacing carving-knife in Hitchcock's British film "Sabotage." The moving camera, in no way a living organism in itself, can play the role of a *persona* in the *Kammerspiel* film—as it does, for example, in Murnau's *Der Letzte Mann (The Last Laugh).* Lighting, as Léger points out in his essay "A New Realism—The Object" can imbue a lifeless artifact with movement: "Light animates the most inanimate object and gives it cinematographic value. . . . A transparent object can remain immobile, and light will give it movement."[1]

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[1] F. Léger, "A New Realism—The Object," in *Introduction to the Art of the Movies,* by Lewis Jacobs. New York, Noonday Press, 1960, pp. 97, 98.

Within expressionist films themselves, then, the division between objects and living organisms is broken down. Méliès had already transformed people into objects—in *L'Homme à la Tête de Caoutchouc,* for example, in which a man's head is inflated like a balloon. Twenty years later, Fritz Lang's films were to concern themselves very much with humans seen as objects: the characters in *Die Nibelungen* are frequently used as if they were merely elements in the decor, and the workers in *Metropolis* operate like machines—a theme which Chaplin was to take up in *Modern Times*—often being grouped in abstract geometrical shapes. Many of Lang's characters, too, in particular Rotwang, the mad scientist in *Metropolis,* Death in *Der Müde Tod,* and Dr. Mabuse in several subsequent films, take on the quality of symbols, become archetypes of sub-human forces who embody the concept of Destiny, or the threat to the German nation in the years immediately after the first world war. These characters, like Pulchinella, Harlequin and the rest in the *Commedia Dell'arte,* have their humanity subsumed to the abstract concepts they represent—an effect intensified by the use of stylized expressionist acting. Many of Lang's films—the Mabuse series in particular—are peopled with villains and heroes neatly divided into moral blacks and whites.

Mabuse and Rotwang, of course, are personalized monsters—so, indeed, is Dr. Caligari; for all their human form, however, they are scarcely more convincing as living creatures than the true monsters like the robot Maria or Wegener's Golem. The German predilection for vampire and Dracula legends bears witness to an abiding interest, not only in necrophilia, but also in the relationship between human and inhuman: Nosferatu or Marguerite Chopin are nothing less than the living become dead, and then returned to a semblance of life. The vampire legend itself becomes an eloquent parable for the art of cinema—a living mind creates an essentially dead strip of celluloid, which takes on new life in the consciousness of the viewer.

One scene in Fritz Lang's *M* epitomizes the process whereby the animate becomes inanimate. Peter Lorre, the child-murderer, has been captured by a band of criminals and beggars. He is brought into a room where they are about to give him a trial, and as he confronts the mass of people assembled to indict him, the camera pans around the group. Before we are aware of it, we are no longer looking at a moving mass, but a still photograph: the image is frozen. What had previously seemed alive in a way that only cinema can effect, has taken on the nature of a painting, inert, as if life had suddenly left it.

The German language, by its very syntax and the nature of its substantives, is anthropomorphic—though it is by no means unique in this respect. The words *Fernseher* or *Fernsprecher,* for example, meaning a television and telephone respectively, suggest literally that a machine is far-seeing or far-speaking—in other words, human, alive. Anthropomorphism is inherent in the German consciousness, and its cinema, consequently, abounds with living objects. The inanimate world *is* what our minds make it, and within our own subjective reality it can as well be alive as dead. Carl Dreyer, talking of *Vampyr*, says:

> "Imagine that we are in a very ordinary room, and that someone suddenly tells us that a dead body is behind the door. Immediately, the room in which we find ourselves becomes totally transformed; everything in it takes on a different appearance. The light and the atmosphere will seem to change, though they remain physically unaltered. All this will come about because *we* shall have changed, and objects *are* what we conceive them to be.[2]

Just as Méliès had changed people into objects for humorous effect, so Chaplin was to bring the dead alive in some of his comic shorts—such as the moving watch parts in *The Pawnshop*. German expressionism has a more somber tone altogether: living as they were in cities, in which tall buildings dwarfed individuals and left them with a sense of being *anonyme*, strangers in an urban jungle in which they felt threatened by an environment which was essentially alien—a situation which the French were later to refer to as *L'Absurdité*—directors like Wegener, Pabst, Murnau, and Lang were to regard the power of objects as no light triviality. The world in which they found themselves was a *persona* in its own right, and such it becomes in their films.

Buildings, not surprisingly, become demonaical in expressionist films. The heroes of *Nosferatu* and Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* are warned by the clientèle of the local inn not to continue to their destination for fear that evil forces will assail them; Hitchcock in *Psycho* and Robert Wise in *The Haunting* were later to make use of similarly foreboding houses for shock effect. Rooms and enclosed spaces, too, bear in on human beings with a claustrophobia all their own, a phenomenon which Polansky exploited with terrifying effect in *Repulsion*. Alain in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is trapped in the stark diagonals of his bedroom shortly before he is murdered by Cesar; Maria in *Metropolis* is relentlessly pursued by a torch beam as she struggles to find a way out of the cave which bears in on her. As Paul Jensen says of this latter sequence, "This is the atmosphere of Lang's world, with an intangible threat existing nowhere, but felt everywhere."[3]

Lang, though he sometimes particularizes this "intangible threat" as being technology, the criminal underworld, or even Destiny, is certainly exceptionally fond of *Grübelei*, of evoking an indeterminate, elusive menace which pervades the world of his films. It is also an important principle of Lang's *Weltanschauung* that oppressors are also victims—like Death in *Der Müde Tod*. Thus the murderer in *M* cannot escape from the attic in which he finds himself, as his pursuers bore their way in from the outside, and Mabuse, in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, is finally run to earth and finds himself locked in his own hideout.

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[2] Quoted in G. Sadoul, *Dictionnaire des Films*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1965, p. 264. My translation.

[3] Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*. New York, A. S. Barnes & Co. 1969, p. 68.

The street is merely an extension of the threatening building. It, too, dominates and controls the lives of its inhabitants. The "Joyless Street" in the film of that name by Pabst, encloses and determines the existence of those who live in it—be they corrupt petit-bourgeois butchers or brothel owners. The streets in which the demoted doorman has to eke out his life in *Der Letzte Mann* offer him no comfort; they arraign him just as his neighbors do. The so-called "street" films of the German expressionist era, no less than Carol Reed's *The Third Man,* set in post-war Vienna and made many years later, contend that people are what they are because of their environment, that anthropomorphic urban surroundings are devils no less real than the Golems of Nordic legend.

Two of the principal means whereby the German cinema heightens the threatening life of the world of objects—namely, the use of décor and lighting—are borrowed from the theatre, in particular the productions of Max Reinhardt. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* for example, makes very powerful use of the psychic effect of diagonals and oblique angles in its sets; its buildings and streets are distorted, ghostly, with painted shadows and streets that seem to lead nowhere. The limitations imposed by economic necessity —the film had to be shot in a studio, using painted canvas scenery—had the felicitous result of forcing the film's producers to create a restricted, two-dimensional world.

The *stimmung* and the claustrophobia of the expressionist world is further intensified by the use of lighting. German and Scandinavian myth and legend, and even the cult of the "Schauer Roman" ("Shudder Novel"), reveal a predisposition for *Dämmerung*—the world of twilight in which the inanimate can readily become alive with no warning. Expressionist films are frequently lit in the style of Reinhardt, using sharp blacks and whites, distorted shadows, and large areas of darkness. Precisely because light or absence of light gives space its reality, being what Germans call a *Raumgestallender Faktor,* it can effect a Hoffmanesque transformation of concrete into abstract, living into dead, or vice versa, making us doubt our senses, and even our awareness of figure and ground distinctions.[4] Not only can chiaroscuro affect our perception; shadows themselves can become alive, as they do when Nosferatu climbs the stairs to Ellen's bedroom; as Peachum addresses the beggars in Pabst's *Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera)*; or as we watch the shadow-play of dancers and a pianist—without once seeing real people—in *Vampyr.*

Most directors of the expressionist period came from cities; some, however—like Murnau, who was born in a rural area called Westphalia—did not. For all the special threat indigenous to the urban environment, anthropomorphism in German and Scandinavian cinema is by no means confined to the phenomena of the city. The countryside and nature itself assail the hero of *Nosferatu* as he is driven to the vampire's castle, and the film becomes negative for a short while; even in films which can hardly be called expressionist, such as *Nanook of the North,* or Stiller's *Herr Arne's Treasure,* which deeply affected Fritz Lang, a hostile frozen landscape determines the existence of human beings. When Hitchcock claims that he was reversing the "dark wet street" cliché by making an open desert landscape pregnant with scarcely suspected threat in *North by Northwest,*[5] he was, after all, doing nothing new. If the "street" films invoke claustrophobia, then Flaherty and Stiller, along with Jean Epstein in films like *Le Tempestaire* or *L'Or des Mers* in which wind and sea combine to attack human life, are concerned with agoraphobia. Vast tracts of open land, sea, wind, and snow are no less alive and aggressive than the enclosed alleyways of the city. Edward Munch, the Norwegian painter, was particularly susceptible to agoraphobic fears of natural settings which seemed to partake of human emotions. He was prompted to paint what is probably the most famous of all expressionist pictures, "The Cry," when, in his own words, he "felt a cry pass through nature." As Lotte Eisner says in her definitive work on German Cinema, "Dämonische Leinwand," quoting Kurtz: "There are intimate and profound ties . . . uniting the countryside and human beings."[6]

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[4] The Dutch artist, Maurits Escher, is a fascinating exponent of subject—object relationships in the expressionist tradition. Woodcuts like "Day and Night," for example, in which the background becomes flying birds, and the birds become background, show his abiding concern with the equivocation of figure-ground.

However limiting it may be to speak of art in terms of national characteristics, expressionism undeniably arose from a Nordic culture. While French artists were developing the soft, curvilinear tones of *Art Nouveau,* German engravers and painters like Otto Dix, Erich Heckel, and Schmidt-Rottluff conceived of the world as a stark and quasi-insane place. As René Clair was revelling in the lighter side of human absurdity in *Entr'acte* and *The Italian Straw Hat,* expressionist directors were more concerned with life as a process of suffering ending in death. The balance, for the Germans, between object and subject was shaky, the one forever trespassing upon the other; human sanity, by implication, is also precarious. To talk of the tragic vision of life as exemplified in art is to discover a powerful, paradoxical element of optimism which pervades the work of tragedians as diverse as Aeschylus and Shakespeare. German expressionism, by contrast, is almost totally pessimistic, closer to the plays of Strindberg, who once said "I find the joy of life in its tense and cruel struggles," but whose works negate even that joy. In Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler,* a group of students ask their professor: "What do you think of expressionism, Doctor?" He replies: "Oh, it's a game, just a game." The only game that expressionist cinema plays with itself and its audience is a version of Russian roulette, with destiny as the bullet, and death the prize.

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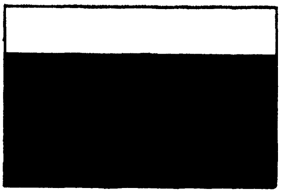
[5] See François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1968). Hitchcock elucidates this point in the interview on *North by Northwest.*

[6] Lotte Eisner, *Dämonische Leinwand* (Wiesbaden-Biebrich, Verläggesellschaft, 1955) p. 70. My translation.



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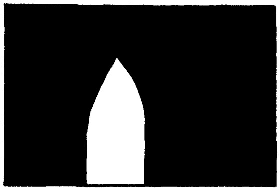

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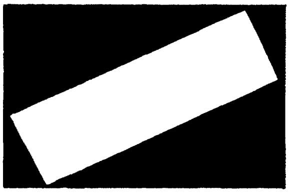

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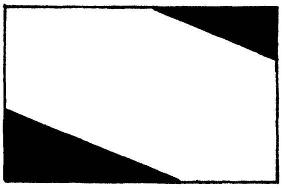

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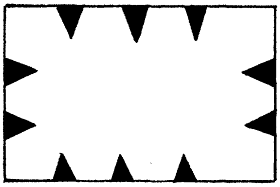

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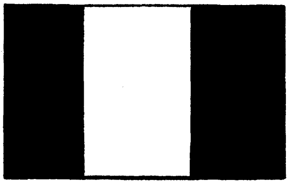

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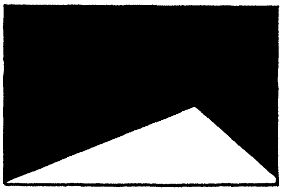

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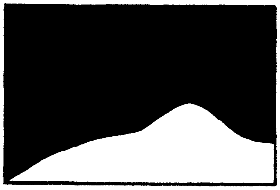

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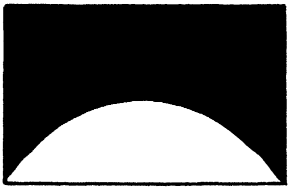

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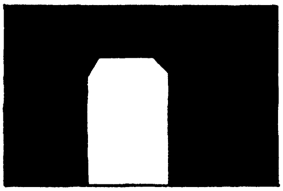

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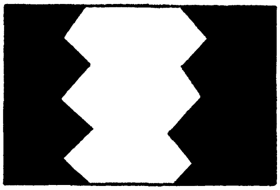

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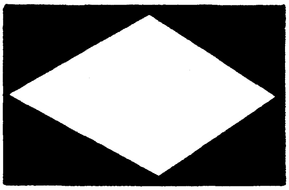

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See next page for note on these maskings.

A Note on Masking in *The Golem*

Lighting and decor play their part in intensifying the claustrophobia inherent in so many German expressionist films. Another means whereby the world is enclosed and its threat made convincing is the use of masking. *The Golem,* made in 1920, contains a wider variety of masking shapes than any other film of the period. American directors occasionally used masking, though they were more fond of the iris for the most part: in *The Birth of a Nation,* for example, Griffith blacked out most of the screen, leaving a long horizontal strip at the top, to emphasize the motion and direction of the Ku Klux Klan[1] as they gallop to the rescue. Erich Von Stroheim in *Greed* used masking for both comic and symbolic effect in a scene in which Mac and his new wife are on the steps of a church—he uses the shape of a Gothic arch.[2] Ernst Lubitsch, in *Madame du Barry (Passion)* was to see the possibilities of masking as a means of simulating threat, a person trapped. As the heroine, Jeanne, has been seduced by Du Barry, he throws her onto the bed, and she becomes framed in a parallelogram.[3] *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* made in the same year, uses a diagonal masking to enclose its heroine as she is carried off by Cesar.[12]

The Golem is far more adventurous. Sometimes its masking emphasizes the shape of the action happening on the screen,[4] isolating a scene in which people watch the Golem chopping wood. Another favorite of Wegener's,[7] with its variant,[8] he frequently employs as a compositional device—at the end of the film, for example, when first the little girl, then the Golem, are fitted neatly into the unmasked area in a very lyrical way. Most of Wegener's masking, however, reveals an expressionist awareness of the need to simulate threat and claustrophobia. Some examples have a menacing jaggedness about them,[11] a feeling of teeth about to devour.[5] In one case,[6] the threat is that which affects the Jews, whose leader is framed in this way. The gates of the ghetto are masked by two stark vertical strips, which entrap the image as the ghetto itself traps its inhabitants. Finally the burning house,[10] and the frame[9] for the Golem laying the girl he has just abducted on a stone, serve as still more examples of Wegener's very unusual repertoire of visual devices.

It is by no means an accident that German expressionist cinema, concerned as it was with the powers of darkness, with people trapped by their environment, and with the claustrophobia which pervades everyday life, should have made greater use of masking than the films of any other country or genre.