

A REVIEW ESSAY

MICHAEL WEDEL

Romanticism, Occultism, and Hygiene

New Literature on Weimar Cinema

Research on Weimar cinema is becoming increasingly diverse. At one end of the spectrum are studies that follow the perspectives of the foundational accounts of Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner and focus mainly on canonized works. At the other end of the spectrum are studies, some of which break radically with conventional perspectives, juxtaposing emblematic works and their authors with a variety of little-known names, titles, and contexts. A number of new publications on the subject can be gleaned from this productive mix.

Romanticism and the Occult

The Romantic legacy of Weimar cinema continues to provide a stable focus for discussion. In her monograph *Special Effects and German Silent Film. Techno-Romantic Cinema* (Amsterdam 2021), Katharina Loew recently coined the term "techno-romantic cinema" and made an important contribution to a better understanding of how this tradition was concretely incorporated into the discourse of filmmakers and trick specialists in the 1910s and 1920s. While Loew argues in terms of cultural and technical history, Kenneth S. Calhoun in *The Long Century's Long Shadow. Weimar Cinema and the Romantic Modern*, takes a primarily theoretical approach to making plausible Weimar

cinema's recourse to Romantic literature and art. Previous studies have often been content to reveal allusions to motifs and imagery; for Calhoon, these are merely starting points for far-reaching aesthetic and cultural theoretical speculations: "This study investigates Weimar cinema and German Romanticism as kindred pathologies, the broad thesis being that Expressionist film (and Expressionism in general) was troubled by the same neoclassical ideal that, more than a century prior, had—in a manner consistent with a modern diagnosis of hysteria—stigmatized the surge of motion/emotion characteristic of Romantic art and literature." (p. 4)

The linguistic style in which the book's central thesis is presented here already conveys an impression of the convoluted, not infrequently hasty, movement with which Calhoon approaches his reflections. Between considerations of motivic-iconographic analogies in film classics like *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* (1920), *NOSFERATU* (1922), *DIE STRASSE* (1923), *ORLACC'S HANDS* (1924), *THE NIBELUNGEN* (1924), *THE LAST MAN* (1924), *FAUST* (1926), *METROPOLIS* (1927), and *M* (1931), and the theoretical-philosophical speculations that emanate from them, Calhoon often moves in several directions at once. Examples and references from modernist avant-garde art and literature serve as inspiration, providing key clues and additional illustrative material. Many of Calhoon's observations on selected examples are original and insightful but are often obscured rather than supported by theoretical discourse and cross-references. In the absence of a concluding chapter to sort through the plethora of flashes of insight, Calhoon does not make it easy for the reader to understand the overarching coherence of his book's components. Thus, despite his theoretical and intertextual efforts, one puts the book down with the sense that the historical and cultural contexts in which one

might usefully speak of Weimar cinema's particular sensitivity and affinity for the mythic and irrational have loosened rather than strengthened in the course of reading.

Barbara Hales' *Black Magic Woman. Gender and the Occult in Weimar Germany*, on the other hand, reveals a clear effort to shed light on at least one of these contexts and to capture it more precisely by example. In four clearly structured chapters, Hales pursues the idea that the resurgence of occult notions of femininity in the culture of the Weimar Republic is to be understood as an expression of a profound insecurity that the phenomenon of the "New Woman" triggered in bourgeois patriarchal society after the First World War. Based on this interpretive foil and drawing on a wealth of evidence from art, literature, and film, she interprets the typifications of "ghost," "vampire and monster," "witch and gypsy," and "trance dancer and medium" as sites of the cultural negotiation of a social desire for emancipation. This negotiation process ended relatively abruptly when the National Socialists seized power.

The movie examples are primarily from the canon. They range from expressionist films like *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* and *GENUINE* (1920), Ernst Lubitsch's *CARMEN* (1918) and *SUMURUN* (1920), *NOSFERATU*, *DER HEILIGE BERG* (1926) and *METROPOLIS* to *VAMPYR* (1932) and *DAS BLAUE LICHT* (1932). In Fritz Lang's episodic film *DER MÜDE TOD* (1921), for example, she interprets the young protagonist's crossing of the border between the realm of the dead and the historical world of the living as analogous to the functions attributed to spirits in the occult and the rituals of their summoning. It is perhaps less easy to follow her in her understanding of the figure of *Nosferatu* as "androgynous" and, along with Ellen, as the second object of Hutter's desire and in her reading of Cesare in *CALIGARI* as the

monstrous harbinger of a new expression of female sexuality. According to Hales, Nosferatu and Cesare even enter a symbiotic relationship with the female characters Ellen and Jane. That the monster thus mutates into a "cipher of female sexuality" (p. 98) - rather than constituting an object of transgressive female desire - is an interesting view that takes some getting used to. By the way, it is slightly irritating that Hales uses the names from Bram Stoker's novel for the characters in NOSFERATU and sets the movie in Bremen instead of Wisborg. But one may be annoyed by such details only because they are the exception in this carefully composed and highly stimulating book.

SCHATTEN and DIE STRASSE

Anjeana K. Hans' essay on SCHATTEN (1923) in the "German Film Classics" series at Camden House also offers a case study of the connection between occultism and cinema. Hans works knowledgeably through the production and performance history of Artur Robison's hallucinatory chamber-play (Kammerspiel) fantasy, which dispenses entirely with intertitles. Her analysis focuses on those levels of staging that make the film, now available in a restored version, appear as a multifariously fractured cinematic self-reflection. She illuminates the historical and cultural contexts in which the specific aesthetic configuration of the relationship between cinematic-scenic representation and a viewer oscillating between detachment and affect can be located.

Hans pays particular attention to the idea, introduced in the film by the metaphor of hypnosis, that character and spectator perception are interchangeable. In its dual function as hallucinatory spectacle and therapeutic measure, hypnosis is also, for Hans,

the means by which the troubled gender relations in SCHATTEN - in English, WARNING SHADOWS - are reordered: "In centering violence as punishment for a woman's (perceived) transgression and constructing it as a catalyst for behavioral changes that restore balance, WARNING SHADOWS reveals much about the anxieties bound up with women's roles at the time. If hallucination does function as a sort of 'therapy,' as Kracauer would have it, then it is a process predicated not so much on revealing unconscious desires and urges as removing the threat posed by women's unruly desire." (p. 64)

This finding is largely consistent with Barbara Hales's conclusions from her reflections on the aesthetic mobilization of occult practices in other Weimar films. One would have liked to hear more from Hans about the role that Albin Grau - as a practicing occultist - played in the conception and realization of SCHATTEN beyond his function as set designer; however, Hans rather sweepingly attributes many of the tricks of the trade in developing themes and staging to director Artur Robison. The question of the extent to which those involved in the film were familiar with contemporary magical practices, such as those of the famous magician Félicien Trewey, is also raised exclusively with regard to Robison. It would have been more appropriate to refer to Grau, who came up with the idea for SHADOWS, or to producer Enrico Dieckmann, who is known to have moved in occult circles.

As the quoted passage suggests, the retrospective reading of SHADOWS given by Siegfried Kracauer in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), written in American exile, is an important starting point for Hans's interpretation.

That another film from 1923 was of far greater importance to the young Kracauer is revealed in Viola Rühse's Leipzig dissertation on his film-related writings from the 1920s and 1930s, now available in book form under the title *Film und Kino als Spiegel*. Her starting point is twofold: on the one hand, she examines the historical seams between Kracauer's film-related and socio-critical texts; on the other hand, she revolves around the biographical caesura of his forced exile, initially to France. Her focus on the time around the turn of the year 1933 illustrates the profound impact this phase had on Kracauer's life. Above all, however, Rühse is concerned with tracing the essential developmental steps in Kracauer's thought.

One of the strengths of her study is that she highlights the special significance of texts that have been overlooked by scholars or whose importance has been underestimated. These include the two versions of a review of Karl Grune's *DIE STRASSE* (1923), in which Rühse finds the first detailed reflection on the street motif that runs through Kracauer's work up to *Film Theory* (1960). By using these supposedly casual works to uncover a network of references to the philosophically ambitious essays "Die Wartenden" (1921) and "Der Künstler in dieser Zeit" (1925) as well as the study "Der Detektiv-Roman" (1925), she can show how the idea of a "transcendental homelessness" of the modern subject, adopted from Georg Lukács and varied across different textual genres, writing occasions, and places of publication, for Kracauer first takes vivid shape in the visual language of the Grune film. It is therefore gratifying that the Filmmuseum München has announced a restored version of *THE STREET*. It will probably make it easier to understand what fascinated Kracauer so much about this movie.

Paul Leni, Thea von Harbou, Friedrich Dalsheim

A recently published book on Paul Leni, who for a long time was a quiet figure, shows how much current research trends are influenced by the restoration and digital availability of films. Hans-Michael Bock's catalog for the 1986 exhibition at the Frankfurt Filmmuseum seemed preoccupied with the source material, and the films themselves had survived only sparingly. What survived was in poor, often incomplete prints and was difficult to access in archives. This situation has changed in recent years, thanks to new reconstructions and restorations available as streams or in DVD and Blu-ray editions. With their anthology *Refocus: The Films of Paul Leni*, Erica Tortolani and Martin F. Norden have taken advantage of this opportunity. The book can be read as an inventory of the current state of preservation and the changing research interests in this director's work. Previous scholarship has focused primarily on Leni's contribution to the two most prominent styles of the first half of the 1920s in Germany, cinematic expressionism and the chamber-play film, from which his later role as co-creator of the Universal horror film seemed to derive. This new anthology now takes up important nuances along this paradigm of continuity and presents a much more refined and multifaceted picture of Leni's cinematic development.

Jaimey Fisher's analysis of *THE DIARY OF DR. HART* (1916/18) reveals a complex genre palimpsest, showing how the pattern of a war film emerges from the strategic recoding of elements of the early "explosion film," the doctor film, and the spy drama. Jason Doerre conceives of *HINTERTREPPE* (1921) as another profoundly hybrid form of cinematic expression, explaining how, in this chamber-play-like film, the expressionist style merges with the legacy of naturalism, with Jessner more responsible

for the naturalistic traits and Leni for the expressionist ones. Of the book's many thought-provoking contributions, Joel Westerdale's re-reading of *WAXWORKS* (1924) is particularly noteworthy, in which he notes a clear preponderance of the comic Harun al-Rashid episode over the expressionist, gruesomely dramatic sections with Ivan the Terrible and Jack the Ripper. Leni's most famous film thus belongs to a hitherto little-noticed line of tradition that did not necessarily contradict the expressionist tendency but could run parallel to it: "From Caligari to Comedy" (p. 89).

Martin F. Norden's research on the stage prologues that Leni produced in 1925/26 for Ufa in Berlin and Universal in New York breaks new ground in film history. The purpose of these short stage shows was to set the mood for the main movie. They thus had an aesthetic hinge function with which Leni varied the open forms of audience address of his contemporaneous *REBUS* films and which, as Norden plausibly suggests, he later integrated in the form of an allegorical opening sequence in his first Hollywood film, *THE CAT AND THE CANARY* (1927). Norden attributes Leni's involvement in the U.S. to his work in this field of live cinema entertainment and thus ascribes a central hinge function to his stage prologues in a work-biographical sense. In sum, the volume, which places much more emphasis on Leni's American creative period in its compilation of contributions, raises the state of research on this still dazzling figure of Weimar cinema to a new level.

Reinhold Keiner's collection of texts and interviews on Thea von Harbou, *Die Frau, die Metropolis schrieb*, does not make a similar claim. Some time ago, in his monograph *Thea von Harbou und der Deutsche Film bis 1933* (2nd edition, Hildesheim, Zürich und New

York 1991), Keiner laid the foundation for a more precise understanding of the contexts in which the life and work of the author and screenwriter are to be placed. Since then, Katrin Bruns in *Kinomythen 1920-1945; Die Filmentwürfe von Thea von Harbou* (Stuttgart 1995) and André Kagelmann in *Der Krieg und die Frau. Thea von Harbous Erzählwerk zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Kassel 2009) have built on his research. Against this background, the new anthology can be seen as an addendum that complements our picture of Thea von Harbou with individual impressions and insights, most of which relate to the person rather than the work. A detailed biographical sketch by the editor is followed, in roughly chronological order, by reminiscences and conversations with contemporary witnesses from Thea von Harbou's personal and professional environment, some of whom have not yet been published and some of whom are difficult to reach in remote places. In addition to relatives of Thea von Harbou and her Indian companion from 1933 to 1938, Ayi Tendulkar, three of her secretaries, as well as friends and colleagues from the film industry, including Lotte Eisner, Hans Feld, Arthur Maria Rabenalt, and Felix Lützkendorf, have their say. They talk about Thea von Harbou's marriage to Fritz Lang, her relationship with Ayi Tendulkar, her daily work, and her changing life situations. The added headings alone open up a kaleidoscope of characterizations and personal assessments: "She was too sentimental for me!" (Lotte Eisner); "She was a lady!" (Hans Feld); "She was a helpful, kind person!" (Aurikel Hannighofer, daughter of Dr Mabuse inventor Norbert Jacques); "She was a conservative and German nationalist woman!" (Felix Lützkendorf); "She expected and demanded discipline!" (Vinajak Tendulkar); "She was not a society woman!" (Elfriede Nagel). It goes without saying that this bouquet of opinions and attributions does not provide a unified picture. In the end, however, this works to the advantage of the person described; she appears more contradictory and complex than she is often portrayed.

Special attention is given in this book to Thea von Harbou's lifelong fascination with India and the relationships she cultivated there. In this context, her generous financial support of Indian students in Berlin since the early 1930s and the central role she played in relation to the "Army of Free India" during the years of the Second World War are detailed. The question posed by Lothar Günther at the end of his short contribution on this subject, what would have become of "the 40 to 50 Indians after the outbreak of war in Nazi racial Germany without the political, material and financial help of a Thea von Harbou" (p. 104), may well cast her involvement in National Socialism in a more ambiguous light.

Unlike Paul Leni or Thea von Harbou, the name of writer-director Friedrich Dalsheim may have been unknown to many until recently. In 2021, the Deutsche Kinemathek digitized and restored his last German-produced film, *DIE INSEL DER DÄMONEN* (1932/33), and screened it as part of the "Film Restored" festival. Ostracized as a Jew by Nazi film policy, Dalsheim emigrated to Switzerland, where he committed suicide in 1936. The proverbial chance discovery of travel and production documents relating to his films (made in collaboration with ethnographer Victor von Plessen) in the attic of the von Plessen's family home forms the basis of a lavishly designed volume rich in material on Dalsheim's short life and his slim but remarkable body of work. Each of his four films - in addition to *THE ISLAND OF THE DEMONS*, *MENSCHEN IM BUSCH* (1930), *PALOS BRAUTFAHRT* (1934), and *THE KOPFJÄGER VON BORNEO* (1936) - follows the concept of an observation that also empathetically participates in the everyday lives of its protagonists. Dalsheim combines documentary footage with staged scenes in which a love story, usually scripted only after the arrival of the film crew at

the site of shooting and performed by amateur actors selected on location. Thanks to this hybrid approach and its poetic appeal, Dalsheim's culturally sensitive films offer something of a counter-program to the blunt colonial gaze of Colin Ross, probably the most successful director and producer of so-called expedition films at the time.

Mainly because of the source material, the essays collected in the book devote the most space to Dalsheim's last film project. But it is above all *THE ISLAND OF THE DEMONS*, shot in Bali in collaboration with the local painter Walter Spies, a former companion of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, and revolving around a village witch named Bedulu, that can claim a place in the extended canon of late Weimar cinema with its powerful infusion of stylistic influences from works by Murnau, Robert Flaherty, and Sergei Eisenstein into the German cultural film tradition, not least because it is a fascinating cinematic study of a belief in ghosts that is no longer "home-grown" and tied to German Romanticism but draws from foreign sources, even if the aesthetics of its cinematic realization sometimes seem eerily familiar.

Among the books reviewed here Paul Dobryden's *The Hygienic Apparatus: Weimar Cinema and Environmental Disorder* is the most unusual. By tracing how contemporary discourses of hygiene came into contact with the cinema of the Weimar Republic at various levels, Dobryden develops an original and coherent research perspective from which the cultural embeddedness and social function of cinema can be reconsidered in radical and thoroughly surprising ways. In doing so, he focuses primarily on non-fictional educational, medical, metropolitan, and traffic education films, as well as reports on housing and working-class life. In this context, he also subjects canonical

works such as Murnau's *FAUST* (1926) and *DER LETZTE MANN* (1924), Grune's *DIE STRASSE*, and Slatan Dudow's *KUHLE WAMPE* (1932) to a stirring re-reading. By questioning the role that hygienic measures played in containing social unrest in the process of rapid modernization and urbanization, Dobryden deftly shifts the hierarchies between supposed masterpieces and so-called utilitarian films. Since they are equally important and significant for the different dimensions of the subject, he pays equal attention to their peculiarities in content and form.

Dobryden's approach is as careful and multifaceted as the broad scope of the subject demands. One chapter traces how movie theaters of the 1910s and 1920s responded architecturally and hygienically to accusations that they were unhealthy places for public entertainment. Another chapter explores how cultural films portrayed the relationship between health care and public order in social contexts of different scales, using the kitchen, the street, and the metropolis as examples. Another chapter examines cinematic representations of non-normative corporeality in urban space. It explores the contradictions that bodies, because of age or disability, create in the traffic flow of a modern metropolis not designed for diversity. As Dobryden convincingly shows, the cinema can present these contradictions in a thoroughly subversive way. The final chapter deals with the capitalism-critical perspective with which left-wing oppositional films in the last years of the Weimar Republic broke with hygienic notions of the common good, progress, and modernization, and tried to point out an alternative biopolitical path. In his perceptive concluding consideration, Dobryden refers to the early Nazi cultural film *BLUT UND BODEN* (1933) as an analogous departure from the right that nevertheless remains clearly distinguishable from the left. While the Nazi

production anticipates the rhetoric of nationalism, euthanasia, and housing expansion, Phil Jutzi's *HUNGER IN WALDENBURG* (1929) and especially Dudow's *KUHLE WAMPE* still cling to the idea of emancipation and solidarity, even where they praise collective physical exercise and clearly recognize the problem of overpopulation.

The highlight of Dobryden's book is the chapter in which he offers an entirely new reading of *FAUST*. He begins with a discussion of the increasingly stringent hygiene regulations that also applied to industrial film production in the studio, and the simple but far-reaching observation that in Murnau's film, smoke and haze dominate even more than light and shadow. Dobryden's breathtaking interpretation of *FAUST* then reveals, layer by layer, the social implications of an extravagant aesthetic of particulate dispersion that undermines the regime of cleanliness and transparency. The fact that Dobryden also demonstrates how films of different genres and film historical appreciation can illuminate each other beautifully, provided one finds the appropriate contexts and asks the right questions, makes the book a model worth emulating.

Kenneth S. Calhoun, *The Long Shadow of the Long Century. Weimar Cinema and Romantic Modernism*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: The University of Toronto Press 2021, 267 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-1-4875-2695-5, \$74.00.

Barbara Hales, *Black Magic Woman. Gender and the Occult in Weimar Germany*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang 2021, 203 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-1-78997-681-6, €54.45

Anjeana K. Hans: *Warning Shadows*. Rochester: Camden House 2021 (Camden House German Film Classics; 8), 94 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-1-64014-091-2, \$19.95

Viola Rühse: *Film und Kino als Spiegel. Siegfried Kracauers Filmschriften aus Deutschland und Frankreich*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2022, 320 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-3-11-070575-1, € 69,95

Erica Tortolani, Martin F. Norden (eds.): *ReFocus. The Films of Paul Leni*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022, 288 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-1-4744-5452-0, £19.99.

Reinhold Keiner (ed.): *Thea von Harbou – Die Frau, die Metropolis schrieb. Texte & Interviews*. Kassel: Media Net-Edition 2021, 143 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-3-939988-25-0, € 22,90

Louise von Plessen (ed.): Friedrich Dalsheim. *Ethnographie - Film - Emigration*. Berlin:

Hentrich & Hentrich 2022, 360 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-3-95565-505-1, € 34,90

Paul Dobryden: *The Hygienic Apparatus. Weimar Cinema and Environmental Disorder*.

Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 2022, 208 pages, ill.

ISBN 978-0-8101-4496-5, \$39.95.