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Creativity Immersed in War: Reflections of Horror in German Expressionist Cinema

Volatile wars and the aftermath of turmoil have been a major discussion considering economic factors, national treaties, etc. while neglecting mindfulness of the areas that dominate our lives in subliminal ways – culture. Likewise goes for the post-traumatic effects that World War One had on German societies, intertwining art and influence to mold a reflection of psychological distress. The anguish and national shock left its imprint on the innermost parts of European lives, which are intended for enjoyment, their rather new-found entertainment, which was moving pictures. The time of the Great War followed, along with the dominance of film as a form of entertainment, which was then used as a tool to deliver underlying political messages. The film began to incorporate the collective fear, disillusionment, and trauma that the ferocious battles left German societies while also looping hidden themes of unspoken political views. German Expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Faust*, and *Nosferatu* convey the psychological horror and angst of 1920s Germany. These films represent societal unrest and critique authority through surrealist aesthetics, mythmaking, and reflections of cultural anxieties. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920) drew widespread attention for its experimental style and reimagination of psychological terror. These themes are translated into the focus of the protagonist, Dr. Caligari, who represents a misuse of authority that instills a mass hysteria-like madness that orchestrates manipulative tactics with the use of a somnambulist, Cesare, to ultimately commit murders. In S. Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, the book analyzes the character of Dr. Caligari as a symbol of tyrannical power and the postwar distrust that permeated the nation, comparable with military policies imposed by several leaders that followed post-war Germany. Caligari is

displayed in the film as a revered citizen in the community and head of the asylum that greatly juxtaposes his true identity, comparable to a mirror that is rather malevolent, striving to incite chaos and confusion amongst the people through the somnambulist to covet his deception. Kraceuer relays a similar message when noting, "The German war government seemed to the authors the prototype of such voracious authority. Subjects of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy were in a better position than most citizens of the Reich to penetrate the fatal tendencies inherent in the German system. The character of Caligari embodies these tendencies; he stands for an unlimited authority that idolizes power as such, and, to satisfy its lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and values. Functioning as a mere instrument, Cesare is not so much a guilty murderer as Caligari's innocent victim. This is how the authors themselves understood him. According to the pacifist-minded Janowitz, they had created Cesare with the dim design of portraying the common man who, under the pressure of compulsory military service, is drilled to kill and to be killed." (64-46). In this way, the film presents a parable to the leaders in power, soldiers, and the citizens who live in the chaotic aftermath. The book highlights the position of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which was an eyewitness to the irrational and unjust practices that Germany partook in the war as an ally – making their place in the film as an audience.

Wiene curates the direction of the film to summarize visual trauma and paranoia, bringing resemblance to dreamlike states that introduced a style of surrealism in German cinema. The film comprises mise-en-scene that evokes psychological disorder, using abstract shapes, tinting, and toning to create monochrome shifts in the narrative and acting behaviors that translate the tone of unrest. Distorted sets were used as metaphors for the post-war fear that permeated the community, as suggested by A. Kaes in the book *Shell shock cinema: Weimar*

Culture and the Wounds of War that points to the German psychologist Georg Simmel's notions of repressed trauma and connecting them to commentary made by another German psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud. The book references this when stating, "Whatever in a person's experience is too powerful or horrible for his conscious mind to grasp and work through filters down to the unconscious levels of his psyche. There it lies like a mine, waiting to explode the entire psychic structure. And only the self-protective mechanism . . . prevents a permanent disturbance of the psychic balance." It is primarily in dreams that neurotics revisit their trauma. "These dreams," wrote Freud, "are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis." Like dreams, films work through trauma by restaging it. Horror films in particular, with their shock effects and near-death encounters, might be seen as attempts to thicken the stimulus shield; they allow the viewer to take part in the experience of the traumatic event, but from a distance, vicariously and safely. Repetition compulsion associated with unacknowledged and repressed trauma may explain the popularity of horror films in Germany after the Great War," finding a source of explanation to the popularity of films that were unsettling during the post-war era (Kaes51). In this manner, the expressionist and dreamlike imagery provided a safe space for viewers to participate in repressed emotions about their societies. The repetition of symbols in the film surrounds a mental asylum, which raises the question of the popularity of the film and what psychological aspect permeated the civilians.

In the film, a distinct scene after the first murder is committed, the community misidentifies the killer and hauls him away in a mob drenched in blue colors. Viewers are shifted to an opening black vignette iris shot to a yellow-tinted frame of Dr. Caligari preparing food for the somnambulist in a coffin-like bed in a remarkably small bedroom, where the next shot shows

detectives outside the miniature home searching for Cesare after he declared during a performance that the victim would die (*The Cabinet of Caligari* 34:13). The visual symbolism and diegetic noise of the shrill sawing of a violin encompass an atmosphere of tension, that hold a greater representation in the post-war societies. With the previous insinuations made by scholars of whom both Dr. Caligari and Cesare represent, one could connect the ideas of stealthy authority controlling a means of harm to society and thus confusing them. Much like the people and soldiers of post-war Germany, their government offered poor economic stability and undermined a mass of soldiers to commit murders based on their account while attempting to counteract the guilt clause in The Treaty of Versailles. Like Cesare, the soldiers rest in an awaiting coffin and are speculated for the blame of mass death.

Another celebrated yet eerie film was *Faust* (1926), directed by F.W. Murnau, which draws heavily from Goeth's original text. The story retells Mephisto making a bet with an Archangel that he can attain the soul of the prominent scholar, Faust. The character of Faust is lured by the devil considering the circumstances of war, plague, and famine that serve as integral themes of the film and parallels with the devastating effects of WWI on the German people. A. Kaes' book points to the scene of the archangel questioning the devil to develop further an allegory to the current climate of political tension when noting, "Why doest thou scourge mankind with war, plague, and famine?" Satan is asked in Murnau's film version of *Faust*, released in 1926. The nexus of war, plague, and famine— three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse— left indelible marks in popular memory, scars that persisted throughout the 1920s. Representations of previous plagues provided a language with which Murnau could symbolize the "Great Death" of the recent war. The numbers of those who died in battle were staggering. The October 1914 Battle of Langemarck, the war's first major battle, saw three thousand young

men mowed down by experienced British riflemen." (Kaes 51). Through this comparison, Murnau uses religious iconography, such as the examples of the horsemen, to combine the Spanish influenza that overwhelmed German citizens who were already burdened with food shortages and a declining healthcare system. Considering the dire circumstances that a modern viewer in time experiences, the apocalyptic imagery that reflects mass death in the film isn't farfetched to believe as an artistic metaphor.

Faust received mass attention due to its visually appealing factor and dramatic special effects, but it was also noted for the exploration of themes such as sacrifice and despair that were prominent in post-war society even almost a decade later. Imitating Goethe's storyline, Murnau's Faust sacrifices his soul for worldly pleasures and knowledge, believing that he can ease the suffering of the people. The character is met with despair after ending up sacrificing his soul to succumb to playing the jester with tricks for royalty in aim for power, a parallel to the soldiers that intended to pursue goals towards nationalism and heroism – only ending up akin to Faust, suffering the consequences of the sacrifice. In P. Fussell's book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, he delves into the memories of cultural artifacts during the post-war era, including Freud's input on apocalyptic and uncanny films rising in popularity in German culture. Fussell records the comments when referencing the psychoanalyst, noting, "Our own death is indeed, unimaginable," Freud said in 1915, "and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it, we can perceive that we really survive as spectators." Through this lens, readers are persuaded to objectify spectatorship as if it were harmless participation to relive stories heard and also perceive their own identification and role in times of turbulence. Freud goes on to state, "The whole thing is too grossly farcical, perverse, cruel, and absurd to be credited as a form of "real life." Seeing warfare as theater provides a psychic escape for the participant: with a sufficient

sense of theater, he can perform his duties without implicating his "real" self and without impairing his innermost conviction that the world is still a rational place." Naming and explaining the interest in themes of evil overcoming good as a sort of solace to be a spectator to another 'world' apart from 'real' life that's equally as disturbing and horrific as a psychological anecdote (Fussell 208). The character of Faust in Murnua's piece dwindles down to a simplified story of heroism taking a wrong turn, leading to a further tragedy that German society related to in terms of the economic failure that seemed to be a consequence of their loss in war. In this manner, the film mirrors the disillusionment of heroism and the false hope of achieving such a thing.

Murnua's supernatural film incorporates a romantic interest with the character of Gretchen, who falls for the handsome Faust and ultimately is seduced and has her innocence taken away. The townspeople react to the love affair, and Gretchen, in turn, is ostracized by society, loses her child, and is imprisoned. When rejecting Mephisto's evil guidance, Faust rushes to Gretchen in an embrace while she is burned at the stake, joining her in death. The scene begins with the shot of the people organizing the stake in the dead of the night, with only flames of torches glimmering against harsh shadows. The following depicts a helpless Faust, unlike other performances of arrogance or sheer ignorance, but with overexaggerated misery. Murnua contorted the comprehension of events when using two title cards to explain Faust's grief that, stated, "If only I had never wished for youth, which caused such misery" and then, "Damn! Damn the delusion of youth!" (Murnua 1:47:36). Through the vivid illustration, modern audiences can piece together the consequence of deception, falling upon the women and children – the citizens. As earlier mentioned, Kaes referenced the devastating 1914 Battle of Langemarck, one of the many battles that involved the death of younger people. Kaes continues on to elaborate on

the weight of the massacre when articulating, "These were for the most part high school and university students— many belonged to the Wandervogel, a prewar youth movement; all were volunteers with romantic ideas of war and patriotism," spotlighting the affinity of alluding to Faust as a symbol of the soldiers in Germany being dismayed by guidance from leadership (Kaes 94). The scene uses fire as a surreal representation that ties into the religious themes associated with evil, such as the plague, war, and famine that was occurring in Germany. In this manner, Murnau hints at Faust joining in the stake to eradicate the sin of the film's world.

The director creates another film with allusions to death and disease in *Nosferatu* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1922). The narrative centers around a mythological-like horror character, the vampire, that pulls from Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. The vampire's character is Count Orlock, who brings death and plague to a town after being visited by his first victim, the real estate agent Hutter. Hutter's wife defeats the vampire by sacrificing herself to him, and he is turned to ash by her purity. Signifying the Spanish influenza epidemic that haunted post-war Germany, the vampire represents the pestilence after the war that couldn't be sustained with the poor economic status of the country. Count Orlock arrives in the town by ship infested with rats that bring on disease, connecting to prevalent historical examples of the disease being brought on from different countries. The character of Orlock's predatory nature impersonates the symbols of forces of death, indiscriminating in its victims. In Kraucer's book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* mentions the evocative religious implications of *Nosferatu* when stating, "Nosferatu is a "scourge of God," and only as such identifiable with the pestilence. He is a blood-thirsty, blood-sucking tyrant figure looming in those regions where myths and fairy tales meet." (Kraucer 79). The interpretation of an imaginative 'scourge of God' insinuates the actions made during WW1 to explain the following pandemic that further

damaged the well-being of the nation's progress to develop post-war. Germans were suspicious of foreign enemies that brought about influenza fueled by propaganda or the result of an international war. The notion of guilt translates in the film as the only explanation being that it was a punishment from God, with the only solution being turning to love. Sacrifice and survival are embodied in the character of Nina, Hutter's wife, who's also referred to by scholars as Ellen, who triumphs over Count Orlock through an act of courage. Aligning with the mythological representations of vampires, Nina deceives Orlock by bringing him into the sunlight where he perishes. Kraucer references the importance of characters that represent innocence, like women who don't participate in war, exposing evil for what it is. Kraucer notes, "It is highly significant that during this period German imagination, regardless of its starting-point, always gravitated towards such figures— as if under the compulsion of hate-love. The conception that great love might force tyranny into retreat, symbolized by Nina's triumph over Nosferatu, will be discussed later." (Kraucer 79). Although a horror film, the character of Nina embodies a metaphor for resilience against societal collapse. Considering the consolation being found in heroism, The concepts in *The Great War and Modern Memory* include explaining ironic heroism and how it highlights the paradoxical role of sacrifice in war. Fussell mentions this ideology when expanding on the prototypical narrative that diverts from the real world when reciting, "The protagonist, first of all, moves forward through successive stages involving "miracles and dangers" towards a crucial test. The setting in which "perilous encounters" and testing take place is "fixed and isolated," distinct from the settings of the normal world. The hero and those he confronts are adept at "antithetical reasonings." (Fussell 146). The fantastical event that brought the film's narrative to culture relies on a miracle that serves as an unrealistic

consolation, paralleled to the unresolved despair of the nation. The influence of romanticism and myth plays a central role in *Nosferatu's* narrative, encircling myth to blend into contemporary.

The famous shot of Count Orlock's shadow creeping up the stairs to Ellen's bedroom leaves the audience in suspense about the looming proximity of death and the unpredictability of the outcome. The employment of expressionistic styles coats nighttime scenes in shades of bright blue or violet; in this case, the first shot begins with the shadow of the staircase. A large foreboding shadow outlines Count Orlock, emphasizing the sharp edges of his talons and broad shoulders, bringing a monstrous undertone. The following shot illustrates a fearful Ellen with mouth agape and trembling and transitions back to Orlock's extraordinarily long hand reaching for the door handle. The hyperfocus on dark shadows with high contrast on facial features make up for the silence in the film and underscores the expressionist style. By imploring the antagonist to attack the protagonist's wife, presents a clearer view of the allegory of an evil power attacking the helpless.

German expressionist films have long been an artistic means of confronting on processing collective trauma post WW1, typically using the horror genre to showcase the psychological aspects of trauma linked to a powerful evil overcoming society. Angst and terror are captured in the mise-en-scene through the rigid shapes, surreal symbolism, and hyperbolic bodily movement and facial expressions. Themes of prevalent calamities in the nation during the post-war era echoed their cries through coveted political utterances in film, serving as both a message to the world but also a tool of identification for the psyche. The lasting influence of these films on the horror genre and their role in visualizing societal fears, supported by theoretical frameworks, proves that angst from war trickled into the spectators and creators – immersing war into creativity.

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