

Crosscurrents of Expressionist Art, Literature and Weimar Cinema: Aesthetics and Politics

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Abstract

This research article explores the intersections between expressionist art, literature and their relationship with Weimar Cinema. There is an analysis of aesthetic connections and the role they play in the shared ideology of rebellion. Weimar Cinema , particular films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *M*, *Metropolis* and *Nosferatu* are studied as the final outcome of the synthesis of stylistic, political and ideological influences of Expressionist art , architecture, poetry ,plays ,novels and music. A close reading of the films is placed in conjunction with an understanding of the political climate of the period and its relationship with modernism. Representations of the City across these mediums is studied to understand the relationship between urbanization and individual subjectivity in these texts. The paper traces the growth and decline of Expressionism to highlight the trajectory of an important modernist movement

Keywords: Expressionism; Weimar Cinema; ; City; Modernism; Aesthetics

Expressionism in art and literature is related to Weimar cinema in terms of the shared idea of rebellion against traditional forms. This paper will argue that this is an aesthetically grounded position that has an effect on our understanding of Expressionism as a modernist movement which eventually devolved into the anti-political use of expressionism in Nazi propaganda films. Expressionist stylistic traits, symbols, themes, editing techniques, narrative technique and the ideologies of Expressionism are crucial to the understanding of these films (Silberman 377). The film image as the synthesis of literature, theatre, painting, music and architecture became an essential tool in the twofold assault on the dominant tradition of film. Expressionist film in the Weimar period became the artistic means of representation and cultivated the viewer's ability to respond to the complexity of the image.

The expressionists found comradeship in their shared disdain of philistines and their *Kultur* and morality. They believed that they were *die kommenden*, the coming generation and the future belonged to them. They combined the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud to develop a discourse that grappled with ideas of generational rebellion, authority and anti-authority and sexual emancipation. Walter Benjamin cautioned writers against creating art that would not influence the apparatuses of art (731-51). He pointed to the way in which revolutionary material can quickly start resembling dominant ideology in its search for spectacular effects to entertain the public. In order to counter this transition he advised artists to generate their own aesthetic techniques and formal strategies that take into account the conditions of production and the entanglement of art with institutional networks of power. The expressionists were keenly aware of these structures and they understood that art and reality are connected. They contradicted the principle that art should be an original and

inspired creation that is crafted entirely by the genius of the artist. Also, they shifted attention away from the search for the work's self-contained meaning. In contrast to the conventional organic work, this progressive discourse attempted to introduce an openness into the forms which destabilized the image. Their work denies the reader any sense of cognitive permanence and conceptual closure. Fundamentally, their art was meant to create a sense of instability and to problematize conceptual mastery. As Ernst Bloch writes, the expressionist avant-garde "tears open still further" any ideological fact which would attempt to order experience by giving it an aura of organic wholeness or a lifelike gloss- the process Georg Lukacs termed "covering over" (16-59).

The avant-garde notion of subjectivity defines it as an ongoing process therefore expressionism has a need to deconstruct the classical-realist, stable representations of subjectivity. The expressionist art of Wassily Kandinsky breaks down the line completely, piercing the object entirely and allows for the free play of subjectivity. He explains his theory of abstraction and writes "It results from an apparent determination to eliminate completely the representational (reality) and to embody content in 'incorporeal' forms (Kandinsky 273). It shatters naturalistic representation and drives the viewer towards a crisis of perception. The non-organic structures of expressionist plays dramatize subjectivity by staging it as fragmented and discontinuous instead of channeling it into the traditional format which consisted of a combination of plot and characterization based on the notion of the individual as a single, consolidated and unique entity. At the level of characterization, it is done by creating a montage of separate characteristics or by constructing a combination of roles rather than a unified individual (Murphy 19). In Ivan Goll's play *Methusalem*, the character of the student is

presented as a constellation of personae. The text gives us a “monoperspective”, a jarring, unconventional view in which the audience does not find an accommodating subject-position (Murphy 20). The multiple figures can be seen in terms of a decentered notion of subjectivity characterized by the slippage, multiplication or supplementation of the self. Walter Sokel writes about an abstract or psychological “objective correlative” revealing those inner states in another character which would otherwise remain concealed (qtd in Murphy 221). In expressionism, the multiplicity of characters are symbols that exist without any logical justification in the realistic framework of the text.

Often different figures in the text play contradictory or conflicting roles. These contradictions take the form of a series of discordant perspectives making it difficult for the audience/reader to believe in the possibility of a singular, intended and unambiguous meaning. This shifts the attention of the audience away from the search for such a meaning and instead allows them to explore the problems of interpretation, epistemological ambiguity and the construction of meaning itself. The double or the *doppelgänger* becomes an important thematic element to bring out uncertainty in context of the ‘Other’. In film, the ‘other’ is a technical fact. The false Maria appears from an iron cast as a robot to mimic the virtuous and religious Maria who is a mother-figure for the worker-slaves of the underground city (Lang *Metropolis*). The same actress enacts sexual debauchery and transcendental purity in an allegorical illustration of the choices available to Weimar Germany (Lang *Metropolis*). Similarly, in *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* multiple figures are linked to each other either as doubles or split-selves as well, such as the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ doctor figures embodied by Caligari, or the two rivals for Jane’s love, Francis and Alan (Wiene). Another important Expressionist

technique is where off-screen acts are shown in shadowed silhouette, another form of doubling (Fig 1).



Fig. 1 Murnau. *Nosferatu: A Symphony Of Horrors*. Orlock creeping up the stairs.

In *M*, Beckert has a shadow and reflections which function as doubles of his screen image. We see the doubles first, the phantom shadow falling across the advertising hoarding at which the girl-victim innocently gazes

(Fig. 2)



Fig. 2 Lang. *M*. The shadow of the killer with a life of its own.

Later the camera cuts to an unexpected shot of Beckert looking at himself in the mirror, examining his own reflection as if it was someone else's. The use of the double, the shadow, the reflection and the 'Other' creates ambiguity, polyphonic meaning and deceit, which subverts conventional rationality. In music, Arnold Schoenberg used atonality—the absence of key. Dissonances are not resolved into consonances. The music is created out of a few short motives that are altered in different ways. The irregular melodies, unique instrumental effects, and extreme variance in dynamics and registers are like the jagged figures of expressionist painting, literature and film.

As Sokel writes “it is the Freudian view of the artist who has sublimated his misery into a dream and projected this dream onto the stage. With this, the keynote of Expressionism is struck: subjectivism. Dream as literature” (qtd in Ritchie 11). The theme of sleep, dreams and desire, the dark side of the rational self, is associated with the crisis of perception. These themes work to both conceal and reveal the identity and the agency of desire. In *Caligari*, Cesare, the somnambulist is the character that carries out the desires of not only the doctor but also of Francis, albeit in a duplicitous and displaced form (Murphy 209). Various acts of seduction, voyeurism, murder and imprisonment are recurrent primary fantasies that occur frequently at the characters' bedsides and their dreams. The themes of sleep and the unconscious are a rebellion against authority and coded as dark and irrational. Thus, transgressive desires are fulfilled through these themes to subvert rationalist notions of identity and causality.

The influence of Freud and his theories about the Oedipus complex gave the expressionists the ideal trope to signify generational revolt: the father-son conflict. Sex is an important theme in expressionism, but more important than sex and the deliberately shocking treatment of its more lurid aspects is the situation of conflict and

rebellion. It is not a conflict between man and woman but the characteristic battle of generations between son and father which often take extreme sexual forms. This theme is the crux of many expressionist plays like Walter Hasenclever's *The Son*, which was probably influenced by the real life story of Dr. Otto Gross, an important writer of psychoanalytic theory. Dr. Otto Gross was institutionalized by his own father to force him back to a respectable academic after Gross published his works which revised Freudian Instinct Theory against his father's wishes (Mitzman 60-61). This incident became a catalyst because it illuminated the mutual support and dependence of paternal and political authoritarianism. Ludwig Rubiner defended Dr. Otto Gross in the expressionist journal *Die Revolution* and wrote:

The throttling of Dr. Gross by his father is typical. We will destroy this type...In the case of Dr. Gross, a significant son, we take up the cause of the many insignificant sons, who unnoticed, are destroyed in broad daylight. We intellectuals, we sub-proletarian are strong...the mad-house keepers, administrators of property and state officials stick together too. We are getting past them, annihilating their positions, burying their honor, destroying their wealth. Our pamphlets are more powerful than their connections (2).

This extract not only highlights the alienation of the avant-garde intellectuals from their forerunners, but also the propensity to characterize authority figures as patriarchal "mad-house keepers". Caligari is revealed to be the doctor at Francis' mental asylum (Wiene). The figure of the artist, the intellectual, "the significant son" and his art above all is the most powerful for Rubiner and the expressionists.

Arnold Schoenberg's "*Die Glückliche Hand*" (Op.18), has as its central character a solo singing voice, that of the Artist who must live for higher truth rather than earthly

happiness such as the love of the woman. The man in August Stramm's *Awakening* is a Nietzschean Superman, beyond good and evil, who survives at the end to point into the new dawn. For the expressionists the individual artist has a unique capability which confers on him a brand of autonomy which is often denied to others. Richard Ohring's essay "Compulsion and Experience", which appeared in the expressionist journal *Die Freie Strasse*, defines experience as the anarchic creative force of personality, the potentiality for which is innate. Compulsion consists of external or internal barriers to the free development of 'experience'. External compulsions exist in laws of nature, customs of society and morals. He writes "...from the first month of our life...everything is aimed at establishing compulsion against our experience, against our tendency to self-expression, and at forcing us to fit into the existing scheme." (qtd in Mitzman 62). In *Metropolis* the son of the industrialist is the 'heart', the authentic artist who must unite the worker-hands with the industrialist-brain. But it is the compulsion imposed by the authoritarian father, the obsessed inventor and the rash workers which stops him from accomplishing his task (Lang *Metropolis*).

However, the expressionist attempt to defend the individual artist against outside infringements and to make reality amenable to his will often lead to the objectification of all other subjects, especially women, who are the self-sacrificing subordinates of the male. In Stramm's play, 'She' is connected to bourgeois notions of marital obedience and love of her children but 'He' gets a glimpse of the cosmic. 'She' accepts the abuse of the mob as just but her sister (It) has eyes to see. It sees in him the genius, the superman, the master builder who has created the city out of his brain. In *Metropolis*, Maria is either the caring sentimental Maria who is captured by Rotwang or the decadent, corrupt Maria who is the object at the centre of a dissolute party of men. Laura Mulvey argues

that the cinematic code positions the woman as an object of either sadistic-voyeurism or fetishizing voyeurism (Mulvey 833-44). However, this stance turns the 'male gaze' into something resembling the Foucauldian panoptic gaze of *Discipline and Punish*. This creates a new, all powerful male viewing subject. For this monolithic male gaze fetishization works: male power can be natural and the female body can be contained-physically, psychically and politically. However, a reading 'against the grain' is possible in *Caligari*. The opening shot of the specter of Jane in her trancelike state demands an explanation, which Francis's tale initially purports to provide. But the presence of Jane as a specter becomes a means of interrupting rational explanation and deferring a logical investigation. The attempt at a rational explanation for Jane's presence is displaced by a new problem, namely the unexplained murders of Francis's tale. The figure of Jane therefore questions the reliability of the spectator's gaze.

The oppositional cinematic code of Weimar film subtly articulates the familiar expressionist theme of oedipal rebellion and of resistance against the irrational authority of overbearing patriarchal characters by emphasis on vision and surveillance. Like American gangster films, the Street films catered to the audience's obsession with the crime, drug use and sexual license, the mainstays of urban living. However, in contrast to Hollywood films, expressionist films like *M* ensured that rationality as a mode of investigation and interpretation was suspended. The attempt to force meaning is derailed with the result that the narrative remains within the sphere of the inexplicable. Both the police and the underworld follow elaborate procedures to locate the murderer (Lang *M*). The police use cartography, finger-printing and psychological profiling. Both the police and the underworld utilize their networks of surveillance and informants to

track down the enigmatic killer. But his final capture fails to explain the reason behind the killings and he remains as the unknowable. Instead, it presents a dreamlike vision, which remains inscrutable, but which nevertheless embodies the 'essence' of what is at stake, the problem of rationality and identity.

Dr. Caligari is the precursor of the 'mad scientist' and obsessed tyrants who appears in various permutations in films like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*; a satire on nuclear war. We are first introduced to him with an iris-in on the individual who wanders jerkily through the carnival grounds at Holstenwall, searching for a spot to display his somnambulist. Caligari's costume reverses benevolent stereotypes: the nineteenth century Biedermeier figure with top hat, caped cloak, glasses and white hair, brandishes his baton like a field marshal, a gesture which would have been immediately recognized by German audiences in the Weimar Republic. Orlok's fanged teeth and nails in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* is an extension of the threat offered by Caligari's white gloves and the black gloves of Rotwang in *Metropolis*. However, it is the rationality of Caligari and Rotwang which turns against them and takes them over-turning them into obsessed figures that lose control. Paradigmatically in expressionism, the attempt to control or explain the unalterable or unspeakable frequently produces a counter reaction. This takes the form of an overpowering eruption of irrational and indeterminable forces, which is similar to Bakhtin's description of the carnival. The underworld's attempt to capture the serial killer ends with the revelation of the "evil thing" inside him which drives him to kill (Lang *M*).

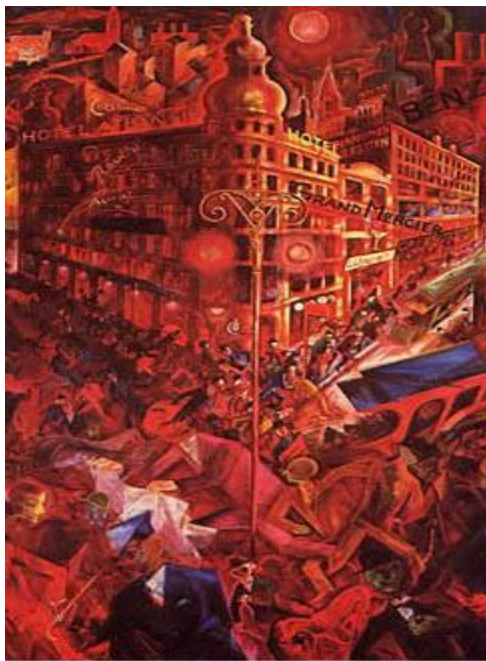
According to Siegfried Kracauer, the original screenplay of *Caligari* by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer was altered to include a framing device, placing 'reality' in Francis' lunatic asylum tale. This undermined the original critique of murderous

authorities that hid within a rigidly hierarchical society (Kracauer 183-94). However, in spite of the change in the script, aspects of social rebellion can be glimpsed in the confrontation between Caligari and the traditional civil authority, the town clerk. The Clerk's high stool is a visual realization of the adage of Kurt Tucholsky, the Expressionist satirist who wrote that Germans longed to sit behind a desk but were fated to stand before one (qtd in Rubenstein 364). Significantly, Caligari's application for a permit for the fun-fair concession is mocked. The permit could have legitimized his show and made it a part of the bureaucratic public sphere but its absence presents a conflict to be overcome in the narrative. Caligari fails to retain an identity in officialdom but the show goes on in the carnival. If Caligari is the authority figure then why doesn't he get access to the rational world? If he isn't then how does he manage to continue without the approval of the authorities? The indeterminate nature of power and authority shakes the notions of rational supremacy.

The abuse of power and authority is an important theme for the expressionists. But it is accompanied by the fear of popular uprisings. The underworld illegally pursues the serial killer in an allegory of the former in *M*, while the workers revolt in a dystopian allegory of the latter in *Metropolis*. In *Awakening* the mob feels threatened by the incursion of the genius into their world and tries to drag him down (Stramm 40-6). Kokoschka's play too starts with men trying to pull Man's horse to the ground (25). The expressionist believed that only the superior individual could bring about social change and that the communication of their message to the masses was the appropriate vehicle for change. The expressionist masses are faceless, characterless and passive robots who are swayed one way and then another by the superior expressionist hero. In *Metropolis*,

the workers appear in geometric formats. The individuals exist only as facets of a choreographed regimented whole. In Georg Kaiser's *Gas I* and *II*, the workers are first persuaded by one antagonist then another in the debates between the Son and the Engineer. Often the masses are the antagonists, the title of the *Die Brücke's* journal was "*Odi profanum (vulgas)*" which means "I hate the common herd". The terror of the hazardous control of the authority is combined with the horror of the volatile hordes. These themes appealed at both conscious and unconscious levels to large sections of an embattled German population after political revolt, economic depression and Versailles.

Before the Nazi's became an actual political threat, the expressionists dealt with the chaos of modern life. Expressionism provides insights into modernity and criticizes the effects of capitalist industrialization on humanity. The city becomes the symbol of conflict, a dangerous terrain dominated by criminal, corrupt geniuses and the menace of lunatic mass murderers as envisaged in films like *M* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. This aspect of the city was also seen in the paintings of expressionist artists like Georg Grosz and Max Beckmann. Images of the city depict it as a futuristic world of threateningly tall, phallic towers that cast their shadow over everything else, a form of building which was made popular by expressionist architecture (Fig. 3.).



George Grosz, *The City*, 1916/1917 (detail)



Fig. 3 Clockwise from top Grosz. *The City*. 1916, 1917. Expressionist painting

Gaudi. *Church In Barcelona, Spain*. Expressionist Architecture

Lang. *Metropolis*. The building towers over the city.

Expressionist poet Georg Heym describes the city's essence in the poem '*Der Gott der Stadt*' (The God of the City)

...The evening's red belly gleams at Baal,

the great cities kneel around him.

Enormous numbers of church bells rise up,

To him like waves from a sea of black towers.

Wild as the dance of Corybantes, the music

Of the millions rumbles through the streets.

The fumes of smoke stacks, the clouds of factories,

Drift upto him like bluish incense smoke.

(157).

Written on a visionary plane, the poem draws on the themes of dreams and hallucination to critique the rapacity of modern industrialization. The city is blamed for the emotional fragmentation of the individual, which is also implied in the film *M*. Stramm has the characteristic vision of the city tottering on the brink of destruction, about to be engulfed in flames only to be saved by water when the dam gates are opened (44-8). In films the precariousness of the city is presented through the setting. The *mise-en-scène* creates a sense of calamity and structural ambiguity which is mirrored in the narration and characterization. The sets of *Caligari* have trapezoidal houses with exaggerated doorways and windows and the streets are elongated and radiate in all directions (Wiene). The flatness of the painted set makes it almost comic and archaic. The sets invert the normal geometry of house and street to create bent streetlamps and truncated trees. The prison cells with the tapering walls, monstrously huge ball and chain and narrow windows, are part of expressionist design which depict the tyranny that extends beyond Caligari's tent. The sets can be interpreted to be a part of Francis' lunacy, but as Kracauer notes, the sets remain intact after the madness has been revealed (Kracauer 190). In *Caligari* the fun fair has a carousel which turns dangerously, while the acute

angles of the roofs that Cesare uses to carry Jane are treacherous. The workers' city in *Metropolis* is flooded and on the verge of collapsing but even the city above is made of jagged patterns and free-floating objects. These perilous features are amplified by the slanted dimensions of the backdrops and the threatening patterns painted on them (Lang *Metropolis*).

John Willett criticizes Expressionism for its “optimistic humanitarianism” (Willett 11). It is feasible to see how he came to this conclusion. Kokoschka's play finishes with the cock crowing the dawn of a new day, while Stramm's play ends with the Christian image of the star announcing the arrival of the new man (32; 48). In contrast the expressionists respond to disorder by highlighting the world's madness and irrationality- for example by deploying embellishment and caricature which subject the familiar and recognizable world to further alienation. The cryptic and mysterious title of Kokoschka's play *Murderer Hope Of Womankind* points to the horrors that are graphically depicted in the play. A typically expressionist strategy involves the production of a dreamlike psychological constellation of figures and a repetitious structure of representation in which the uniqueness of figures and actions is replaced by their mutual displacement, permutation and infinite variability. Instability affects most aspects of expressionist narration, characterization, scenery, décor, costume and make-up. They are all extreme, distorted and discontinuous and therefore typical markers of expressionist excess.

The stage directions in Kokoschka's play take up as much room as the actual dialogue. This indicates that gesture, mime and the settings are as important as speech. In both *Metropolis* and *Caligari* the mad head movements and peculiar gaits of the actors

creates a bizarre world for the audience. The actor's bodies become the field where meaning is enacted. Stramm's play has the tempo of a silent film with all the miming, exaggerated gestures, long stares, and silences that one associates with it. Expressive pantomime is considered more influential in enacting the anxiety of the avant-garde. This principle is also used in expressionist painter Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*.

The expressionists developed a condensed style in language, which was termed 'Telegram Style' because of its short, succinct nature. Indecidability becomes the principle around which the text is structured, the means of dramatizing a fundamental state of epistemological crisis. The Naturalist style called *Sekundenstil* attempts to capture the whole of reality as it happens second by second. In contrast the telegram style is associated with the experience of being unable to grasp the 'real' meaning of signs. This is a means of destabilizing and questioning authoritative and rationalist constructs at the centre of dominant discourse and classic realism which have been disguised as 'natural'. The following lines from Stramm's *Awakening*, illustrate the style

HE: give a start hurriedly] But what if I [makes a sign].

MANAGER: stares at him] You you you [gets the meaning and immediately changes tune] what?

HE: calmly] Let's discuss this quietly [signs for quiet] my wife...

MANAGER: suddenly all sympathy, puts down the crowbar and rubs his hands together]

Oh!

(37).

In a typically expressionist scene, the extent of the internal crisis of Caligari's subjectivity is emphasized by being projected in words onto the very landscape which he walks, emerging as letters on the landscape as if in the form of an external injunction (Wiene).

The counter-discursive embodied in the ‘Telegram style’; emerge in this projection of internalized sanction onto the exterior.

The expressionists also deploy spectacle to foreground ambiguity. The playwrights of the expressionist movement attempted to unite the plastic and kinetic space forms with optic-acoustic formations. In the immediate pre-war and the post-war years in Germany a vast amount of intensive experimentation sprang up. The playwrights used all the resources of the modern stage like the spotlight to conjure significant optical illusions, colours, choreographic groupings and gestures out of the surrounding darkness. For the staging and scenery of the piece “*Die Glückliche Hand*” (Op.18) the composer Arnold Schoenberg gave detailed instructions which involved elaborate symbolism achieved through lighting and an expressionist dreamlike stage. The technologies of cinema allow films to bring out the subversive effect that is emphasized by expressionism as a movement. The use of the iris-in serves as a destabilizing shot in *Caligari* by restricting the image to a restricted visual space on the blacked-out screen. This makes the spectator aware of the representation itself, and thus the processes imposed on their perception. As the iris opens, the spectator is forced to acknowledge that they are seduced and locked into the narrative. At the same time, they perceive the representational restrictions placed upon the viewing, highlighted by the clear artificiality of the constructed two-dimensionality of the scenery. The German title of the film *The Cabinet Of Dr Caligari*, used the word “Kabinett”, which denotes a type of spectacle, with the cabinet functioning as a special room which contains a collection (Murphy 208). Cesare is advertised as a life-size poster to lure audiences at the carnival, and then his body with his eyes closed is offered up to the audience to arouse their

specular interest. Similarly in *Metropolis*, the robot, another automaton, is proffered by Rotwang to the industrialist.

Conclusions

German expressionist film began to decline in the mid-twenties. In Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, the expressionist theatrical norms are converted into silent procession (Rubenstein 372). The only voice in the film is the Nazi party's "German" greeting, which marks the movement away from revolt. The Nazi's did not discard expressionism completely. They used its stylistics in stagecraft. The heraldry of the Nazi party's 1934 party day had it all- a gothic city, imperious leader atop reviewing block, the uniformed faithful marching in decorative groupings and the use of shadows in Nazi wartime newsreels to depict a sense of victory (Rubenstein 372). The Nazi's used pseudo expressionist stylistics, but Expressionism's characteristic sense of liberation from the need to render itself completely intelligible lends itself to the creation of pointedly abstract and de-aestheticized forms. As a cultural movement it had a preference for abstract forms and 'aesthetic ideas' rather than 'logical presentations', which was key to its stance as an avant-garde and oppositional mode of discourse.

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