

History (Whose Story?) “Written With Lighting”: A Cinematic Representation of the “Traumatic Past “of the Germans in World War I

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The powerful ability of film to present the traumatized German war veteran that traces how some of the most vulnerable members of society, marginalized and persecuted as ‘enemies of the nation,’ attempted to regain authority over their own minds and reclaim the authentic memory of the Great War under Weimar Germany and the Third Reich. The mentally disabled survivor of the trenches became a focus of debate between competing social and political groups, each attempting to construct their own versions of the national community and the memory of the war experience. By examining the psychological effects of war on ordinary Germans and the way these war victims have shaped perceptions of madness and mass violence, the expressionist cinema explores how the classical German cinema of the Weimar Republic was haunted by the horrors of World War I and the the devastating effects of the nation's defeat. This paper purposes to analyse how this post-traumatic cinema transformed extreme psychological states into visual expression; how it pushed the limits of cinematic representation with its fragmented story lines, distorted perspectives, and stark lighting; and how it helped create a modernist film language that anticipated film noir and remains incredibly influential today.

Keywords: Great War, trauma, Germans, cinematic representation, German Expressionist Films

History has made us witness many wars and bloodshed among more than two nations. Every nation has its own perspective or the “truth” to explain. In the book, *Western Civilization*, it is written that “the scale of the Great War or the First World War was such that it quickly became a ‘people’s war’, to which all civilians as well as soldiers and sailors were directly and totally committed”.

The Great War had a devastating impact on Germany. Throughout war, the people of Germany had been lead to believe by their government that they were winning the war. Government propaganda had been used to great effect. When the temporarily blinded Adolf Hitler had gone into hospital in 1918 (the result of a gas attack), he, along with many German soldiers, was convinced that Germany was not only winning the war but was in the process of putting together a major military assault on Allied lines. German Army could not stand up to such an attack and in just a few weeks the German Army had collapsed. The euphoria of the success of the Luderndorff Offensive was quickly forgotten. Many Germans could not accept that they had lost the war. Germans saw war as glory which is directly mentioned in *All Quiet on the Western*

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Front released in 1930. In the beginning, we see the professors of college collecting soldiers for fighting for their country and all the students, inspired by the patriotic speech of their professors, joining the army. To them it was an activity that they were doing as a group of friends; it was an illusion of an adventure. Only when one of their friends dies and they are exposed in the battlefield, gradually they start to feel and grasp the reality of war and death.

Throughout the movie, there was no sign of patriotism, but only the steps of remaining alive in the battlefield. Not a single soldier knew what they were fighting for; they even breached the border in search for food and physical recreation from the enemy land. The movie illuminates us through the story of some German soldiers that it was merely a war of power, not a war of saving the land.

Paths of Glory, the movie, released in 1957, represented corruption and a morally rotten court-martial of the French Army, where the Army General yearns for the fame of a hero, in which the perspective was, “no matter how many gets killed, it’s all about conquering a piece of land”.

The horror these soldiers occupy daily is a world in which generals casually estimate that 55 percent of these very men might be killed in a stupid attack and found that acceptable. When the victims of war or the soldiers found the reality of the war is not at all about the glory of patriotism—not nationalism, nor loyalty to the country, it’s all about power and supremacy, lust of power and authority; these movies present how the Germans started suffering from severe shock of mind and haunted by their traumatic past since then.

It was very difficult for the societies to cope with the lingering effects of war. The shock of humiliating defeat affects a nation’s identity. And movies play a significant role in making the trauma visible. The classical cinema of Weimar Germany is haunted by the memory of a war whose traumatic outcome was never officially acknowledged, let alone accepted. Though the Great War was more thoroughly documented in photographs, newsreels, and autobiographies than any previous armed conflict, the painful reality of defeat remained taboo for everyone except left-wing intellectuals and pacifists—the very parties held liable for this devastating outcome. The shocking conclusion to the war and the silence in its wake had disastrous consequences for the first German democracy and its culture. Unspoken and concealed, implied and latent, repressed and disavowed, the experience of trauma became Weimar’s historical unconscious. The double wound of war and defeat festered beneath the glittering surface of its anxious modernity. The Nazis exploited that shameful memory and mobilized the nation for another war to avenge the first.

A traumatic event inscribes itself and becomes stored in the body without the mind having any overt awareness of its presence. The trauma returns involuntarily by way of flashbacks, repetition compulsions, and psychosomatic illnesses. Precisely because a traumatic shock eludes conscious understanding, it is not directly accessible to memory or speech; it constitutes a “failure of symbolization”. Traumatic experience manifests itself only through its symptoms, and therefore requires that its meaning be constructed retroactively. Some of the films discussed in this paper are about those who are struggling to reconstruct a traumatic event in the past. These films provide the opportunity to work through that repressed shock from the perspective of the present.

Weimar Germany was a “shell-shocked” society struggling to deal with the consequences of the First World War. Unprecedented numbers of healthy soldiers found it impossible to cope with the psychological strains of industrial warfare. Mental breakdowns and their physical symptoms became alarmingly common during the war, and military authorities feared that soldiers might attempt to mimic the symptoms of shell shock as a means of escaping the trenches. As a result, war neurosis was stigmatized and the military charged psychiatrists with detecting shirkers and “curing” afflicted combat veterans. Anton Kaes (2009) places Weimar

cinema in a broader context by drawing upon a vast literature on war neurosis to articulate the extent to which postwar Germans were traumatized by the war. However, Kaes’s treatment of war neurosis fails to acknowledge that, as recent research suggests, an overwhelming majority of soldiers coped effectively with the mental tensions of battle and even remained “unrealistically optimistic” about their chances for survival. Thus, accounts of nervous breakdowns in the trenches have to be balanced against the reality that most soldiers managed to maintain their wits in the face of enemy fire.

Freud, too, explained war neurosis as a result of a mental conflict that splits the ego: The conflict takes place between the old ego of peacetime and new war-ego of the soldier, and it becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newly formed parasitic double. Or, one might put it; the old ego protects itself from the danger to life by flight into the traumatic neurosis in defending itself against the new ego which it recognizes as threatening its life.

Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Wilhelm Murnau’s *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, and Fritz Lang’s *Die Nibelungen and Metropolis*, all of which are hallmarks of Weimar film culture, masterpieces of German Expressionist Films, represent the most prominent examples of this shell shock cinema. Articulating an indirect, but more poignant understanding of trauma than many traditional war movies, these films translate military aggression and defeat into domestic tableaux of crime and horror. They transform vague feelings of betrayal, sacrifice, and wounded pride into melodrama, myth, or science fiction. They evoke fear of invasion and injury, and exude a sense of paranoia and panic. These films feature pathological serial killers, mad scientists, and naïve young men traumatized by encounters with violence and death. They show protagonists recovering from unspeakable events both real and imagined, and they document distressed communities in a state of shock.

Shell shock certainly affected an exceptional number of soldiers during the First World War, and the disturbing scars of war plagued millions of Germans in the postwar years. This paper focuses on how the two classic Weimar films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1919) and *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (dir. F. W. Murnau, 1922), addressed the trauma of the war experience, as well as Germany’s military defeat, without attempting to reconstruct battle scenes from the trenches or deal directly with the war. Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, represented an attempt to confront “those forces that had participated in and prolonged the madness of war” (1919, p. 48). Set in an asylum, *Caligari* utilizes flashbacks to interweave multiple stories into a complex narrative that exposes the insanity of the war, mistrust of the psychiatric establishment, and the prevalence of xenophobia in postwar Germany. Even before the war’s end, it was clearly almost impossible to produce authentic representations of modern warfare. It was *Caligari*’s total lack of realism and its use of “decomposed and shattered forms” (1919, p. 82) that made the film’s unspoken critique of the war so powerful. In short, *Caligari*’s shell shock style allowed it to capture the experience of the trenches more effectively than any effort at recreating the battlefields of the First World War. Siegfried Kracauer saw the character of Caligari, a madman who can provoke murder, as a presentiment of Hitler, Anton Kaes pushes for a less deterministic approach by exploring the film’s narrative gaps: Both the film and the platform of the National Socialists could be viewed, then, as commentaries on the mistrust and paranoia that categorized the early years of the Weimar Republic. The film seems instead to point inward. At the end of his journey, Francis indeed discovers the monster—but the monster from outside turns out to have been inside all along. The evil stranger is no other than the respected director of the local mental ward. However, Cesare represents the proxy through which Caligari commits his crimes; he is not a guilty murderer but actually a victim of Caligari himself. Kracauer claims

that Janowitz and Mayer 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” (Kracauer, 1947, p. 65). The revolutionary aspect of the story becomes apparent in the end, when Francis and reason overpower the insane authority of Caligari. The fair also represents the general trend of Germans retreating into a shell to escape the postwar world. People of all classes and ages enjoy losing themselves in the fair, in the glaring colors and sounds. This is yet another hint at modernism, in which cities are portrayed with the same mind-numbing effects. Adults regress back to their childhood days in which games and serious affairs are identical and there is little responsibility (Kracauer, 1947, p. 73). The fair reflected the chaotic condition of postwar Germany. From this perspective, the film’s politics, instead of being situated in authoritarianism, belong to its anti-mimetic stance: the unreliability of its narration and the visual rhetoric that reviewers of the time associated with insanity.

Likewise, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* with its vampire, epidemic, and female hysteric, the fact about mass death and self-sacrifice, about the inside and outside of a community has been shown. It is a cinematic record of the suffering associated with the First World War according to Anton Kaes. Just as soldiers marched toward the front to confront death and participate in a timeless rite of passage, Murnau’s lead character, Hutter, leaves his wife behind. He then embarks on a lengthy eastern journey that promises financial success. In the process, he encounters mass death in the form of a plague, as well as the embodiment of horror—*Nosferatu*—the vampire. Kaes depicts *Nosferatu* as a tale of loss and sacrifice. The plague deaths allude to the casualties of the First World War and the vampire represents “an ultimate otherness that must be eliminated” (2009, p. 101). Hutter displays classic symptoms of shell shock throughout the film, and his inability to protect his wife from the vampire speaks to the profound sense of emasculation in postwar German society. Ultimately, the constant death that accompanies the vampire’s westward journey comes to an end when Ellen, Hutter’s wife, gives herself to the vampire in the interest of the community. Kaes sees this development as a reference to the sacrifices made by too many members of the “lost generation”. It too explores the uncanniness of film in its uncertain boundary between reality and hallucination, by specifically working with technological effects to materialize immaterial or phantasmagorical forces.

Expressionism had its roots in the 19th century—in philosophers like Nietzsche and Marx, and in artists like Van Gogh and Munch—and flourished in the early 20th century. And then, of course, the movement was strongly and darkly influenced by the unimaginable horrors of the First World War, which shattered empires and dynasties, redrew the map of Europe, and turned the dehumanizing tools of the Industrial Revolution into an efficient way to kill some 16 million people. In the years after the war, expressionism took on a more political air, becoming a means of exploring both personal alienation and the need for political and cultural revolution. In the words of scholar J. W. Syed, “Expressionism, like Romanticism, was a voice of protest against the whole materialistic and mechanical trend of modern technological and industrial civilization which reduces man to a ‘robot’, alienates him from his own essential nature and makes him a prey to purposeless, tedious and meaningless existence...” Kasimir Edschmid defines expressionism as “a reaction against the atom-splitting of Impressionism, which reflects the iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature”. “German Expressionism” flourished in the era of the Weimar Republic, the government in place in Germany between the end of the First World War in 1919 and the rise of the Third Reich in 1933. The entire country attempting to recover in every way from the horrors of the War to End All Wars was suffering from skyrocketing inflation and widespread unemployment.

The term “shell shock” which doctors used to diagnose frontline soldiers coined during World War I to describe soldiers suffering from nervous breakdowns—as a metaphor for the psychological wounds that found expression in Weimar cinema which portrayed paranoia, panic, and fear of invasion in films peopled with serial killers, mad scientists, and troubled young men. Some of the most seminal German movies made in the 1920s found artistic expression for this elusive yet widespread syndrome. Just as shell shock signified a broad array of symptoms, the movies show how this post-traumatic cinema of shell shock transformed extreme psychological states into visual expression, pushed the limits of cinematic representation with its fragmented story lines, distorted perspectives, and stark lighting; and how it helped create a modernist film language that anticipated film noir and remains incredibly influential today. But despite their manifest differences, all of these films found a way to restage the shock of war and defeat without ever showing military combat. They were post-traumatic films, reenacting the trauma in their very narratives and images.

This conjunction between legacies of war and modernist filmic experimentation is developed in subsequent parts, which move from setting out the ways film replayed the war’s tropes of mental instability and death to how it dealt with rebuilding the national psyche. The paradigm is Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), which is seen as actually the first film of the Great War. Its story of a somnambulist and an asylum director raises questions about the location of the monstrous in its ambiguity over who is insane versus who is simulating insanity. By doing so, it disregards linear temporality and teases out the link between cinema and hypnosis.

These were, literally, post-traumatic films. The war psychiatrists of the time used the metaphor of re-running a filmstrip for their work with hypnosis in handling trauma. *Shell Shock Cinema* (2009) makes the claim that Weimar cinema followed the model of the psychoanalytic talking cure, where repetition leads to interpretation. Films are never organic, unified wholes carrying a single message. Rather, they are fractured entities that must be read, like products of the unconscious, by means of their omissions and silences. The purpose of this paper was to focus on the ways in which films after 1918 allude to, displace, and relive the experience of war and defeat. Weimar culture is as much post-traumatic and films which give us glimpses of this alternative history. A silent film’s historical moment—the political, social, and cultural force field within which it was produced, distributed, seen, reviewed, and discussed—is anything but obvious. Many references that were readily understood by contemporary audiences are lost on us today. Although no archive, no matter how immense, will ever allow us to unearth and reconstruct a historical moment in its totality, situating films from the 1920s in their original “habitat” can go a long way toward unlocking and reactivating their symbolic power. This means repositioning films within the cultural production of a time and a place, but also appreciating them as complex appropriations of the world and unique interpretations (not reflections) of historical experience. These films reveal a wounded nation in post-traumatic shock, reeling from a devastating defeat that it never officially acknowledged, nor ever accepted.

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