The Dark Side of the Screen—A Resistance to Changing Times

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This essay argues that black and white cinema spawned a resistance to changing times that is still very present in the new generation of directors who follow classic film traditions while subverting them with consistent narrative inventions. *The Artist*, the best picture Oscar award winner in 2012, is an example of this resistance as it pays homage to some of the greatest silent films of the first two or three decades of cinema history. "The Dark Side of the Screen" aims to underline that there is an unchanging power of the *phantasmagoria* so present in black and white movies, produced not only in the silent era but also in film *noir* through lighting effects and camera angles which characterize the work of major noir directors like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Orson Welles, who knew everything about the unutterable mysteries hidden on the dark side of the screen.

Keywords: film noir, black and white cinema, dark side, resistance

Modern Times (1936), known as the last of the great silent feature comedies, reflects Charlie Chaplin's resistance to changing times. Synchronous dialogue was everywhere ascendant by the time of the film's release, yet it contains mostly sound effects, synchronous music, and a pattern song with nonsense syllables. *The Artist*, the best picture Oscar award winner in 2012, inherited this resistance as it pays homage to some of the greatest silent films of the first two or three decades of cinema history. As a silent movie, it is screened in black and white and projected in the old-fashioned boxy academy ratio, with its occasional lines of dialogue printed on intertitle cards. The concept behind this motion picture is hardly revolutionary; in fact, it has been seen before in the 1976's *Silent Movie* directed by Mel Brooks. This *old fashion* tendency continues in the acclaimed Portuguese movie, *Tabu* (2012), which was directed by Miguel Gomes and awarded for opening new perspectives on cinema, in spite of following classic film traditions while subverting them with consistent narrative invention, creating a lyrical immersion into colonialist metaphor and historical memory. This film is not to be confused with F. W. Murnau's movie of same title, *Tabu*. Gomes' movie borrows the Expressionistic style of the early film era, using luxurious black-and-white photography. What all these movies have in common is a desire to preserve the true essence of cinema showing what it really is and not only what it can do. All these directors believe the best way to achieve this purpose is through an unchanging power of *phantasmagoria*, which is so present in black and white movies. *Phantasmagoria* was not only produced in the silent era but also in *film noir* through lighting effects and camera angles that characterize the work of major *noir* directors like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Orson Welles, who knew everything about the unutterable mysteries hidden on the dark side of the screen.

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Living in a world of uncertainty and change, sometimes we feel like Chaplin in *Modern Times*: The world is changing but not necessarily for the better. We should be aware that Chaplin's movie shows a man suffering in a world of change. The central character is a factory worker who tries to cope with the perverse effects of the industrial revolution in a fast-changing U.S. economy. As Millard Mitchell said in "Singin' in the Rain", the public was suddenly in a frenzy over "Talking pictures! Talking pictures!" Sadly, with the advent of synchronized sound and dialogue, the world of silent filmmaking began to slip into obscurity with audiences and studios now viewing it as obsolete and undesirable. Nevertheless, Chaplin continued his passion for the subtle craft by creating *City Lights* (1931), which many critics and academics consider one of the greatest films ever made. By the time *Modern Times* was released, though, he was one of the last directors left clinging to a dying art form. Chaplin, probably the best film-maker/performer of the 20th century, did not despair. He fought back fierce-heartedly and in 1936 *Modern Times* was a major box office and critical success because it was beautifully made, wonderfully written, perfectly performed, smart, insightful and always brilliant. It was not an entirely silent film (there are dialogue snippets and sound effects), but if we watch it closely, every character with a dialogue (excluding Chaplin himself) is being mocked. Even when "The Tramp" opens his mouth (the only time he ever did so in a film), the words are nonsensical, defying the burgeoning convention that dialogue is mandatory for substance, entertainment, and quality.

Despite this film's status as one of the greatest comedies of all time, it is hard to ignore its social and political criticism. In his movies, Chaplin often exhibited a great mistrust for authority and progress, as often embodied through the social elite, the police, and wealthy entrepreneurs. The irony of the film's title, then, is two-fold. It connects with Chaplin's own bitter feelings regarding his dying art form and refers to the plight of the working classes during the Great Depression (long working hours with little job security for meager salaries while the upper classes remain wealthy and bide their idle time). The world was changing fast and Chaplin foresaw that many of these changes were far from beneficial. As we watch "The Tramp" struggle through the modern, mechanized world, we laugh at his antics and the absurdity of their results, but we can also feel pain and pity. He is clearly a man who does not belong. Indeed, "The Tramp" can almost be thought of as a misfit who has gone through a membrane from an alternate reality and unwittingly fallen into our familiar world (notice that he does not have a name or identification of any kind and, as far as we know, he has no friends, family, funds, or history). He takes on assembly lines, feeding machines, department stores, policemen, and various other mass-oriented aspects of the industrialized world (all which demand and exhibit sameness and conformity), but "The Tramp" (and his symbolic extension, the individual) never seems to fit.

This is, consequently, why *Modern Times* is one of the most poignant love stories ever put on film. The only character who is on the same level as "The Tramp" is a young, homeless woman, "The Gamin", played by Chaplin's then-wife, Paulette Goddard. The two are brought together by the fact that they have almost nothing except the will to live and continue forward, despite adversity. Both are nameless, none of them has a home, and they each have no money or material possessions. Through these characters Chaplin makes his most poignant and saddening statement about modern living. "The Tramp" and "The Gamin" are the only ones who exhibit individuality and idealism; yet, they are also the ones lowest on the social and economic food chain. The conclusion of the film, which most likely reflects Chaplin's own emotions, is tinged with sadness, and a lingering hopefulness that resonates as loudly and clearly today as it did more than 60 years ago. The humans become

smaller and smaller and more insignificant, like the hero of this very funny comedy that speaks about very ugly things in a very amusing way.

Chaplin's criticism of the excesses of industrialization establishes a direct association with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) from which it certainly drew inspiration. Expressionism's fear of technology can be found in Chaplin's scenes where he portrays humans, enslaved by machines and by those who control them. This opposition can also be seen in *Metropolis* where there is existential angst caused by living in a city sharply divided between the working class and the city planners. Love is presented as the only possible way to surpass these differences along with the belief in a prophecy that predicts the coming of a savior. In spite of showing impressive images of the skyscrapers of New York, where some can see a positive vision of Europe's future, *Metropolis* is far from utopian. The film makes audiences feel there is an underlying warning that technology can become a threat instead of a blessing, which contributes to represent not only the political chaos of the early years of the Weimar Republic, but also an image of America as a new and disturbingly ambivalent modern world. We sense the presence of those dark forces deeply hidden in the special effects animated by high-voltage fluorescent lights that seem to represent Hollywood's energy involved in the process of changing the future of cinema. As a mirror of its own time, *Metropolis* represents its ambivalences and incoherence, like Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Both directors were aware of a world of soulless, industrialized production, which could find the most appropriated representation in Expressionist art due to its emphasis on the dehumanized individual and on the contrasts between light and darkness. This led Ian Roberts to conclude that:

> Weimar's directors wanted to portray the horrors abroad in the world which threatened to oppress and overwhelm the weary individual; depictions of the individual ground down by the twin beasts of capitalism and industrialization; and explorations of the human psyche and its extreme states. (2008, p. 17)

This produced a pessimistic outlook on modern living, expressed and partaken by Chaplin, which explains why ultimately nothing changes in *Metropolis*. Fritz Lang's futuristic vision intended to expose and tear off the mask of civilization hinting that a dark reality remained concealed behind it, which made the process of reducing its dimension and power of darkness even more difficult.

Expressionist directors were very interested in introducing aesthetic changes to break with established traditions of artistic representation searching for a new mode of creating dream worlds where light and darkness were combined in an innovative style. However, they were limited by an obvious restriction because they could only shoot in black and white. What distinguished them was their power to turn this limitation into a very successful creative process that produced an art able to fuse the visible world with the invisible one in a way that forged not only dreams, but also terrible nightmares. The simplicity obtained by the absence of color did not prevent this kind of cinema from being used as a medium for subversive and powerful images, because as Murnau once said: "real art is simple but simplicity requires the greatest art" (Roberts, 2008, p. 50). On this account, German Expressionist films created a cinema essentially devoted to artistic goals, which included violent contrasts, a special liking for the *chiaroscuro* and shadow as well as several experiments with artificial and painted lighting effects. In Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in particular, we cannot be indifferent to the startling zigzags, the nervous arabesques, the furniture's exaggerated dimension, and even the shadows, which were painted onto the flats that formed the walls of the town and on several interior spaces, such

as floors and staircases. In Murnau's *Nosferatu*, lighting also plays a key role with many scenes being shot in a half-light which renders the edge of the frame almost totally black, though this is normal in a film centered upon a hideous creature of the dark.

Emphasis on the contrast between light and darkness was directly associated with these directors' interest in what they called "the inner machinations of the psyche" (Roberts, 2008, p. 13). They discovered a way to represent the rational world of daylight and logic and contrast it with its dark side of insanity, horror, and fear of the night. If Expressionist cinema is determined by many elements from several artistic and filmic sources produced by the visual style of Murnau, Lang, and Wiene, it is also often associated with the Gothic. Heidi Kaye, in her essay entitled "Gothic Film", characterized it as a genre born in darkness that has a natural affinity with cinema, concluding that:

> Drawing on the nineteenth-century tradition of stage melodrama adaptations, some of the earliest motion pictures were based on Gothic fiction. Over the century, Gothic elements have crept into filmic genres from science fiction to film noir and from thriller to comedy. (2001, p. 180)

Moreover, we should never forget that Expressionist cinema was also very influenced by the Gothic Horror novel, especially the popular horror tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann which expressed the concept the Germans called *unheimlich*, something weird and uncanny that Freud connected to a sense of subconscious horror and repressed emotions. This explains why the creators of Expressionist cinema were more concerned with invisible terrors than with external ones as Edvard Munch's *The Scream* also demonstrates. In *Berlin in the 1920s*, Rainer Metzger observed that: "[Expressionism] always set its sights on tumultuousness and fragmentation, on separation and collision, and right to the last moment it poured out its heart and soul in the search for language to convey violent and nervous exertion" (2007, p. 78). The portrait of Dr. Caligari, an authoritarian and Machiavellian figure responsible for the descending into madness of an individual who seemed to have faced the horrors of the Nazis, is an example of how we can understand the results of machinations or perversities of the human mind, which required an appropriated set able to depict those psychological states of fragmentation and unbalance. Dark atmospheres and spaces were the best metaphors for the disorders of tormented psyches and all Expressionist films dealt with themes of terror, the double, and the consequent fight between good and evil.

The importance given to intense and violent emotions through an angular and hallucinatory style that created phantasmagoric transformations of reality, transmitting a powerful sense of chaos and creating a bleak vision of life, may be correlated to the creation of the American *film noir* whose origins can be traced to the German Expressionist films of the late 1910s and 1920s. This led Foster Hirsch to conclude that:

> the German style offered an appropriate iconography for the dark vision of the forties thriller and also because a number of German directors fled to Hollywood from a nightmare society, bringing with them the special sensibility that permeated their early work. (1981, p. 57)

In her interesting study on the Expressionist film (1969), Lotte Eisner used the expression "haunted screen" in the title to define a cinema that created stories with a strong sense of entrapment and isolation in which human freedom was completely lost. This gloomy fatalistic vision was applied to the pessimistic tales of social failure, fatal attraction, and pervasive criminality in *film noir*. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston, *Double Indemnity* (1944) by Billy Wilder, *Laura* by Otto Preminger, and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) by Edward Dmytryk

are some examples of *film noir*. In these motion pictures, directors were able to find a visual counterpart to their dark content, subverting traditional genres and creating a new type of crime film: one that is less interested in crime but more curious about the enigmatic psychology of the characters. Through this process the films acquired a greater sense of reality which turned them into accurate mirrors of the dark side of American society. Their stories about adultery, greed, murder and paranoia contested Hollywood's official morality, which followed The Production Code, used as a means to support the *status quo* and the mainstream opinion responsible for establishing the "correct standards of life" (Palmer, 1994, p. 5) at that time. Representing the police and society as inherently corrupt, indeed no better than the criminals who opposed them, *film noir* had to be against Hollywood's traditional portrayal that represented detectives as virtuous and criminals as vicious. Establishing a contrast between feelings of anguish or insecurity and the reassuring effects promoted by many Hollywood productions, *film noir* intended to reveal the inauthenticity of their stereotyped emotionalism, since Hollywood studios were not expected to confront their audience with ambiguity and mystery or to challenge them to think about the meaning of life. Violent deaths, morbid psychology, underworld characters, fatalism, and atmospheres of terror were perhaps not very fashionable among the general public. Consequently, these films were not commercially attractive. As Barton Palmer concludes in *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*:

> Film noirs were usually low-budget ventures, even the "A" productions. In fact, that such films did not require expensive forms of spectacle was an important reason the studios were eager to make them. But unlike other studio types, such as the western and the musical, noir stories could not be turned into blockbusters to suit the commercial requirements of a new age; their claustrophobic depiction of urban malaise was simply not suited to the glamorizing afforded by the wide-screen processes that came into vogue at this time. (1994, p. 167)

However, in the immediate postwar era, dark cinema became an insistent presence on the nation's screens because people felt an urgency to have a look at the underside of the American character. At a time when nothing was certain, the dark world of crime, violence, and annihilation became a vehicle for socially critical themes. Contemporary life in American cities was presented as being invaded by alienated criminal minds which persecuted helpless individuals. As a result, *film noir* offered a dark image of the American dream which marked the beginning of dark cinema and horror movies. In *Dark Directions*, Kendall Phillips studies the connections between filmic horror and cultural anxieties, observing that horror films make up a particularly interesting barometer of America's darker and more violent attitudes because "among the most popular early silent films were those featuring criminals, outlaws, and gunplay, and these elements have remained relatively constant features of American cinema" (2012, p. 2). Thus, it is significant that the American horror film began in 1931, one of the darkest years of the Great Depression, when Universal Studios released two specters of evil that stand as the foundation of the American horror film—Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931)and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931). As (North) America has always been a brutal place, violence was a theme constantly present in many movies especially because the most popular silent films were the ones where criminals and outlaws abounded. Horrific images of demons, monsters, and madmen have always been part of the American cinema (Phillips, 2012, p. 2). About *film noir*'s legacy, in *The Dark Side of the Screen*, Foster Hirsch underlined that: "*film noir* constitutes a body of striking work that represents the American film industry in its most neurotic, subversive, and visually provocative phase" (1981, p. 209). Its psychological complexity and the dramas of

people in crisis have had an impact on contemporary film style, because *film noir* was able to penetrate into a universal heart of darkness.

In spite of all the inevitable changes caused by adapting dark cinema to different cultural and historical moments, these films always project human fear and anxieties, which have changed throughout time. Yet, something essential and unchanging has remained: the tendency to go against the transience of times and the perils of technological excesses. By creating special visual and digital effects, which often prevent the subtlety of images, dark cinema has focuses on the psychological complexity of characters and the human dignity of the actors who sometimes seem to become preys to these changing or darkened times where everyone is a victim of an economic power, an unstoppable machine operating in a terrible and manipulative system invented by a crazy Caligari or a grotesque Count Orlok whose elongated shadows threaten to engulf all our light with their darkness.

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