

21L.011, The Film Experience
Prof. David Thorburn
Lecture Notes

Lecture 6 - German film

I. German film and Expressionism

- Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (1969)
- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Weine, 1919)
- *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926)

II. F.W. Murnau (1889-1931)

- Nosferatu (1922)
- Sunrise (1927)
- *Tabu* (with Robert Flaherty, 1931)

III. *The Last Laugh* (1924)

- The unchained camera
- Themes
- Character: work and personal identity
- The ending: true or false

Disclaimer: *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

Film viewing tonight:

Murnau, F. W. *The Last Laugh*. 1924.

- Remember, material from the lectures and material from the readings will both be tested on the exams
 - I intend my exams to be intellectually and emotionally enhancing: if you've gone to lecture and done the reading they should be easy. You should expect to be able to do wonderfully well on the exams if you're doing the work. They should be empowering.
 - If you keep up with the course and really apply yourself, you shouldn't be in a situation where you have to pull all-nighters.
 - There will be material from early in this lecture that will definitely show up on the text.
- Review from this afternoon: We were examining the power of editing and mixed shots to create emotion and to control and rivet the audience's attention in Eisenstein's work.
 - This is an emblem for how film relates to revolution, politics, culture
 - Compare this to the potential for social irresponsibility that exists in some American comedies of the period.
 - Don't let the intensity of the subject matter detract from your ability to notice the technical editing genius.
- Expressionism

- At the turn of the 20th century, the term referred specifically to artists in Europe, particularly Germany, in certain years: around 1903-1933.
- It deals with certain fears in our life. Vampires, etc.
- S. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* – this book makes the disturbing but powerful argument that expressionism in this period laid the groundwork for the rise of Hitler.
 - The freedom from restraint, etc that was encouraged during this period
- Expressionism aimed for the external representation of our inner life
- It was very psychological, and dealt with elemental emotions
- Some of the sources for the movement lay in the previous German Romantic movement of the previous century.
- It also had to do with the situation of the Weimar republic in Germany. The system was very unstable, with enormous wealth gaps and great uncertainty. There was also a kind of apocalyptic sense of newness.
 - You can see a lot of these qualities in the visual appearances of film in this time.
 - Disorienting lighting and set design, both meant to evoke some idea of morbid states, inner fears and anxieties, distortion.
- Expressionism aimed at irrational fears and anxieties that were thought to lie in every human breast, and that could be released by certain representations
- Clip shown: from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1919)
 - Keep in mind how late this is: it's after nearly all of Chaplin's important shorts had been made.
 - Note the treatment of women, the sort of voyeurism involved. On some levels this film is about illicit sex. And in many ways this subtext is very close to the surface – the filmmakers were aware of it.
 - Probably the most extended scene this early in the movies of a woman lying vulnerable and partly unclothed.
 - Note the silhouette effect that's used. It's not very cinematic. Rather, it's still highly theatrical. The camera is highly arthritic. The motion is lacking. Its visual effects are limited. The chiaroscuro effects are remnants of the heritage of theatre and visual art rather than that of cinema.
 - I'm not suggesting that it's trivial, because it's content is a disturbing investigation of sexuality, murder, irrationality, vulnerability.
 - However, this ambitiousness is literary rather than cinematic. It has to do with the expressionist influence of artists and poets rather than filmmakers.
 - And while this film makes a great contribution to that literary and artistic development, as a film in the history of cinema, it's less relevant.

- There was an overall greater tendency of European film to behave this way, and the greater respect that European film had for Art with a capital A was disabling in many ways.
- Fritz Lang: *Metropolis* (1919)
 - Probably the first science fiction film
 - Clip shown: the opening
 - Note how much the opening of Chaplin's *Modern Times* was influenced by this.
 - German films of this time were largely financed by the government, so their creation was very centralized.
 - The visual effects still aren't necessarily as sophisticated as other films of this time.
 - The movement in this clip might seem very slow, but remember that audiences of this time weren't trained to process visual effects nearly as efficiently as we can.
 - Another clip shown: a view of the factory in *Metropolis* and the development of Moloch.
 - Note that this is where Chaplin got the highly stylized factory set in *Modern Times*.
 - Within limits, you can still see how much less cinematic and fluid the editing and shots are than American films of this period
 - Of course, there were still many European films that were much more fluid than this. However, this is an illustration of the greater power that theatre and art still had over film in Germany during this period.
 - On the other hand, American audiences and filmmakers just didn't care nearly as much about the theatrical and artistic heritage regarding theatre, which had both negative and positive effects
- The Director who freed German film from this limiting heritage was the one who directed tonight's film: F. W. Murnau.
 - Consider the heritage of the vampire story. It seems silly and certainly implausible in many ways. But it's something that has fascinated audiences for many, many years.
 - *Nosferatu* continues to be very alive in the world of film studies.
 - There was recently a remake with John Malcovitch
 - In any case, the important element for us regarding this film is its form, shots, editing, the use of the real outdoors instead of just indoor sets.
 - Note that there is a sort of conflict between form and content
 - Clip shown: from *Nosferatu*
 - Note the use of real horses, real outdoors
 - The use of a still camera in order to show the motion of the characters, the setting.
 - Note the unusual placements of the camera, from above or below, showing visually and intellectually exciting elements of the setting.

- Whatever might be going on in the story, there are always other elements to see in the setting, camera, etc.
 - *Nosferatu* freed the camera
 - Murnau made many other great films
 - He later immigrated to the U.S.
 - The greatest of his films was likely the one we're going to see tonight: *The Last Laugh*.
 - This is one of the very few non-comic films of the silent era that still stands up as fun-to-watch for modern audiences.
 - It's focused on an ordinary man. There's something pretentious, vain, and flawed in his character. This makes our sense of interest in him even more poignant
 - Work is very important in the film. When the character gets fired and loses his uniform, it's like he's lost his identity. He even tries to steal the uniform back.
 - The film is deeply concerned with social class.
 - Some people might say that the acting is a bit heavy-handed, but keep in mind that it reflects the heavy-handedness of the character himself.
 - There are moments when the camera sits on an elevator or on a moving bicycle – this was highly revolutionary at the time. There's even a point when the strap the camera to the belly of a staggering actor.
 - Karl Freund (1890-1969) was cinematographer.
 - He had a deeply impressive career, making great creative contributions to silent film, sound film, and television – all three mediums.
 - The happy ending wasn't originally planned for. The producers required it at the last minute because they felt that it was too much of a downer.
 - Note that there are no subtitles anywhere in the movie until this very end of the film.
 - It's a signal of the transition into this demanded ending.
 - The lack of subtitles is a deeply impressive indicator of Murnau and Freund's ability to master their visual medium.