

The following content is provided under a Creative Commons license. Your support will help MIT OpenCourseWare continue to offer high quality educational resources for free. To make a donation or view additional materials from hundreds of MIT courses, visit MIT OpenCourseWare at [ocw.mit.edu](http://ocw.mit.edu).

**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

This afternoon I talked a bit about Russian film and suggested that among other things that the cultural environment in which the Russian film emerged was an environment of revolution and of ideological turmoil. And we could say, therefore, in some degree, if Russian film served revolutionary ideals and the ideology of the Bolsheviks, the German film had its own sort of boss, its own authorities that it was following. But it was not in a narrow sense political or ideological as the Russian example was. But it was something similar.

The German film I want to suggest for a good part of life, a silent film, was in thrall to established culture. It's an example of the sort of thing I was saying this afternoon about the difference between European cinema and American cinema. American cinema grew up in an atmosphere of wild populist freedom, almost untouched by the cultural authorities who mostly on the east coast of the country dominated literature, drama, and so forth-- music.

In contrast, in Germany, the film grew up in the cultural centers of the society, and the dominant cultural figures, the major writers, the major dramatists, the major poets and musicians, the established theater actors and directors all migrated into the film. And it gave German film a tremendous intellectual ambition and authority from its various earliest stages, and I'll show you some examples of this.

It made the German film, especially the German film in the period between the end of the First World War and the advent of sound that sometimes is called-- I don't know if this is correct-- but some people call it the golden age of German silent film, the golden age of German film, because an extraordinary number of very important and influential films were made in this period, roughly from about 1916 or '17 through the '20s, through about 1926 or '27 before the advent of sound.

And it certainly is a very distinctive and influential moment in the history of cinema, but as you will see in the examples I'm going to give you, influential as many of these films were, they were influential in what we might say-- they were influential in part not because they were wonderful examples of exploratory innovative cinema, but because of the grandeur or the

disturbing authority of the themes they encompassed.

In other words, the German film, as I suggested this afternoon, because it was guided by cultural authorities who were adept at earlier media, at older media, they already came to the making of film, of their films, with high artistic intentions. I'm not so sure they realized those intentions, because they didn't explore the full nature of film as much as might have been done. But they were interesting and deeply influential films.

And I should also admit that my perspective is, perhaps, biased. There are certainly many, many people who have written magnificently and seriously on this era of German film, who would not be negative as I am about what I'm calling the sort of uncinematic or unvisual qualities of some of the masterpieces, early masterpieces in the category. It's a contested argument, and I don't want you to simply accept my word for this. Take it as a perspective that could be qualified or even challenged by other folks, and especially by certain film scholars who see this moment in German cinema as a really fruitful and generative moment.

Much of the basic understanding that we have of German silent film comes from one remarkable book by a woman named Lottie Eisner, and I wanted to mention it here. I borrowed a tremendous amount of what I'm going to say from her book, learned a great deal from it. Eisner was a wonderfully important historical figure, worked as a film historian and annotator and film archivist for a good part of her career. Some of you who are film buffs may know that Wim Wender, as the great contemporary experimental German director, dedicated his film *Paris, Texas* to Lottie Eisner.

She worked for a long time in the French Biblioteque, the first great archive of movies in the Western world. She also wrote books, separate books about Murnau and Fritz Lang, two of the great figures in this tradition we're looking at briefly this evening. And her arguments in *The Haunted Screen* are still widely accepted.

The book focuses on the Weimar period, the period before the rise of Hitler, after the First World War, in which German culture was an astonishingly rich, fermenting, stew of innovation and anxiety. It's the era of the great cabarets, and you will return to this era in an imaginative way when you come to see the film *Cabaret* later in the term, which tries to reimagine that moment. And it actually dramatizes the era in which the German films I'm talking about this evening were made.

One way I can begin to identify or explain the distinctive qualities of these German films is to

talk briefly about the idea of expressionism. The broad word expressionism refers to movement in modernist art that involves principles of distortion and surreal exaggeration.

So an expressionist work of art, either a painting or a poem or a film, is in some degree interested in finding equivalents for the inner life, dramatizing not the external world, but the world within us, and especially the tormented world within us-- our anxieties, our fears, our sexual fantasies, our murderous impulses. There's a dark, disturbing side to expressionism, especially to German expressionism.

There are expressionist artists who appear in other traditions, and expressionism is a movement that goes far beyond Germany. But one might say that German expressionism is the expression of modernism in German culture. It's almost indistinguishable. If we talked about modernism more generally, we would say that not every aspect of modernism involves expressionism. But in Germany, we would say the modernist impulse was embodied in the expressionist tendencies of the art forms that appear in that period.

Let me talk a bit about them. They involve the external representation of the inner life, as I've said. And they're interested, the expressionists, in elemental emotions like fear, love, hatred, anxiety. They're interested in our aggressive and appetitive impulses. The sources of this expressionist movement are in German romanticism. This is the literary movement that gave rise to important poets and painters in the earlier part of the 19th century.

And also in economics, in the historical realities of German culture, because the period we're talking about when these films were made, the Weimar period was a period of-- was a unstable and turbulent period. There were power outages all the time, for example, frequently, even in the major cities like Berlin. And the visual style of the expressionists-- there were expressionist painters, expressionist poets, expressionist musicians, expressionist dramatists. Virtually all the art forms in Germany in some degree participated in this interest in the irrational and in the hidden and in the turbulent night side of our personalities.

And I can, perhaps, very quickly capture some of the essence of this movement by showing you a couple of paintings that are examples of this expressionist movement. Let me show you one image first, and then I'll do a slideshow while I talk a bit more, and you can watch the slideshow.

This is a painting by the German painter Beckmann, and it's called "The Family." It sometimes

has been used as the illustration on the cover of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. And we might say incidentally, if you're looking for examples of what expressionism would be like, how many of you have read Kafka? Only a couple. OK. How many of you remember the first sentence of *The Metamorphosis*? All right. I'll tell it to you in some translations.

Gregor Samsa awoke one morning after a night of uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. Maybe the most famous first sentence in modern literature. But think about that. And then the whole story proceeds from that shocking transformation.

So one of the things that's characteristic of these forms of expression of are principles of exaggeration that take you into surrealism and into modes of exaggeration that attempt to illuminate reality not by giving you a realistic picture of it, but by exaggerating certain elements in reality so intensely that you understand them more deeply and fully than you might have otherwise.

It's important to recognize that surreal impulses like this or expressionist impulses like this do not mean that the stories or art forms that are committed to these strategies are unrealistic in the broadest sense. That is to say they still talk about reality. It's just that the realities they talk about do not allow themselves to be represented in straightforward ways, because they're either hidden, or the intensity that they represent is so hidden within us that if you represent them externally, you need to exaggerate. You need to highlight. You need to enlarge.

So we might think of Kafka as a literary embodiment of this principle of expressionism, and we might think of paintings like this as the painterly embodiment of it. And look at this. We won't have to spend much time on this, but look closely at it. Look at how the whole family is crammed together in an incredibly tight space, the ceiling pressing down on them. Look how grotesque each of them is.

But what's the most obvious thing about the painting? Can you see what it looks like? None of the characters are looking at each other. There's no connection between them. They're all isolated in their own little space. Not only are they physically grotesque and a little weird, but they're all caught in their own narcissistic or, perhaps, drug-induced stupor.

Calling it "The Family?" Think of what an unromantic unsentimental view of the family this is. But it's the principles of distortion and surreal exaggeration that you can see in this image that we might say are the essence of what is meant by expressionism. Do the slideshow now.

While I'm talking, I'll show you a series of images by other painters, and we can put this on so they'll see what's what. So just play this, Kristen, while I continue. So one of the things that-- so this expressionist movement was central to all the high arts of German society at the time. And it's, therefore, not an accident, not at all, not even remotely an accident that such energies would express themselves in the new medium of the movies, because so much of the German art establishment was already embracing principles of this kind.

And some very remarkable, of course, and significant, immensely influential films grew out of this movement. They emphasized atmospheric qualities like lighting and set design, and they were interested, as I've already implied, in morbid states and in distortion, in inner fears and anxieties. And what one of the things that the expressionist moment in German cinema certainly did was it tremendously furthered our sense of the power of the cinema to explore human subjectivity. Even the films that, for me at least, looked more like historical artifacts than living works of art have this fascination for us, for me.

We might also very quickly acknowledge how profoundly influential the movement was. Can you think-- any of you know what famous directors after the-- not even German directors-- are linked repeatedly with German expressionism, have connections to them? One of them is Alfred Hitchcock, who actually, his very first film was a co-production with German producers. And he carried it-- if you think of Hitchcock's work, Hitchcock carries the some of the darkness and the distortion and the interest in our inner convulsive lives that is present in German expressionism.

But there are other examples as well. The American gangster film shows the influence of German expressionism very powerfully, and the great American director Orson Welles was steeped in German expressionism, and some of his greatest effects and the atmospheres of his films could be said to be a direct outgrowth of expressionist directing, of expressionist movies. So it's a critical and powerful movement.

So let me now turn to a couple of examples to give you a sense in film of how this expressed itself. And my first example comes from the film, the very famous film directed by Robert Wayne, called *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. It's a story about a murderer, who when he goes to sleep, he turns into a monster, and he wakes up and he walks around like a somnambulist ready to kill people.

And it may be there were, of course, lurid stories in the public press of these kinds of all the

time. So there may have been, in the watching of the film, there may have also been a kind of [INAUDIBLE] in the audience of feeling that what they were watching potentially was possibly real or reflected certain forms of certain possibilities in reality.

But as you'll see, the film is tremendously stylized. It's tremendously planned in a way. One of the most interesting things about the film is that the sets were designed and painted by prominent expressionist artists, and then the fact is it was as much an artwork as it was a movie.

Let me show you part of it, and you could see for yourself the consequences of an artistic movement that grows out of traditional art being transferred to the movies. Here's a scene from the film. Do we have sound? No sound, I guess. Sorry. There would have been music, of course, and very scary music.

Maybe you can hear some of it. I think their soundtrack is also a new one. It was superimposed and made for the film later. But I suppose in a certain way, this has a kind of interest. But do you see how static it is, how uncinematic it is, how stable the camera is, how the emphasis is on-- I don't know. What could we call it?

On set design, on surreal angles, on this strange form of lighting? This chiaroscuro black and white lighting, very great emphasis on contrast between black and white, of course, becomes a trademark element of expressionistic films and then is carried over in many other film traditions, including the American tradition called film noir-- dark film, black film.

So here's this somnambulist walking over to the sleeping woman. We might note parenthetically, isn't interesting how long one might say that this is one of the earliest horror films? How long has the horror film used as one of its central elements violence against women, and especially sexual violence against women? Look at this. Do you see how he looks like an actor on a stage?

Now surely it was intentional that they put those two men who were woken up by the noise in a space that seems without space. There's a surreal ungrounded element in the film. All right. So they're looking for her now, and they're going to be [INAUDIBLE]. Can you speed up, Kristen, so we don't watch the whole thing in slow motion, in full, but we get near the end? Is that possible to do?

So they're-- keep-- let it speed up a little bit more. OK. Now we're near the ending here. Again,

see how static it is, how that's impressive, the building of the sets might have been impressive. But you see how in some sense how uncinematic this is in certain ways?

Seeing the camera stable in one spot, active moving toward it, moving in and out of the camera's range. This is a theatrical idea of what the camera should do. It's sitting in the audience watching a set, and in fact, you can feel the theatrical authority here. Watch this image now. And then it's something clever if you're interested in silhouettes, creating an image of darkness and horror, I guess.

But you can also see the limitations of it. I want to show you one other example, a more distinguished example, an example that does begin to manipulate the visual image in somewhat more rich and significant ways, a film even more influential than *Caligari*, what is called so often the first science-fiction film. It was the very first feature length science-fiction film in the world. Its title is *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang.

And at the time, many film scholars claim it cost something like five million Reichsmarks to make. I don't know if Reichsmarks were the equivalent of dollars, but let's assume they were. In 1926, this was the most expensive film that had ever been made up to that point, and it is a measure of the authority and the prestige that movies had in German society, that so much money would be invested in a film.

This would never have happened in the United States. They weren't spending that level of money on American movies. They didn't have to. They couldn't. And in some sense, it shows you the authority and the centrality, but it also explains why we had to wait before the German film fully discovered its cinematic or its filmic essence. And I'm going to show you what I think is the moment or one of the moments in which this discovery was made.

And the director we're looking at tonight, FW Murnau, is the director who made this discovery and freed the camera from the constraints of high art, from the constraints of the inherited attitudes toward art that the established culture in Europe and especially in Germany imposed upon the making. So here are a couple of scenes from *Metropolis*. Still, I think we're not fully there yet, but it's a significant film. It's much admired by certain film scholars, although not by me.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Some of you may notice how Chaplin borrowed from this introduction. And you could certainly

see how this film influenced *Modern Times*. Feel a lot of Chaplin there, I hope. You think there's an idea or an attitude toward what labor means in these images? These are the workers of the city. Interesting that such a politically radical film would be so heavily financed. That's enough of this. That's plenty of this, too much of it, in fact, I think.

But can we speed up a little, Kristen? I think we can come to one more image from a different part of the film. So I won't talk about the plot of the film, which is rather ridiculous I think, although it's also a kind of science-fiction fantasy, a dystopian fantasy. But there is a sequence later in the film.

Let's go further. So here's another image, another moment from the film. Visually more exciting, but it also shows you in some sense how literary the film is. And also, I want you see it also, because it remind you, again, of how much Chaplin borrowed from this movie when he made *Modern Times*.

Now there are many imaginative effects here, but still, you see how stable the camera is, how stationary it is? The kinetic power of the camera had not yet been discovered, not because it was undiscoverable, because the Americans had discovered it a decade earlier, but because the power of older forms was inhibiting the people making the movies.

Again, in the early days, you can imagine that some of these effects would have been very dramatic-- the falling bodies. Still, watch what happens here. We've turned symbolic-- Moloch, the devil, the devil's henchman. That's what modern industrial society is, a maw that will swallow us up. You see how weird and disturbing it is. Thank you, Kristen.

A serious, an interesting film, but still in certain ways, I hope you could see both deeply melodramatic, and the acting styles are very broad. Where do they come from? Theater. They're theatrical acting still. They haven't fully adjusted despite the power of these films, and in intellectual and thematic ways, they haven't fully adjusted to the idea that they're movies. And the man who solved this problem or the German director who understood more fully than the others what it meant to make a movie was FW Murnau.

His dates are on the board. You could see he died in his early 40s. It was a tragic death. He was just coming into his own as a great, great director. He had emigrated to the United States in the late '20s, and the film I've listed on the board, *Sunrise* in 1927, was made in the United States. And many people think it is the greatest silent non-comedy made in the United States.

It's a bit sentimental, but there are brilliant, brilliant, brilliant things in it. It's a very, very rich artifact.

And then with the famous documentary director, Robert Flaherty, his last film *Tabu*, which he co-directed with Robert Flaherty, became a tremendous success. But he died in 1931 just before the film was released, just on the verge of a kind of a claim that perhaps no other director in the world at that time had. It's tragic, a tragic story.

The film in which we can see Murnau freeing the camera is the film called *Nosferatu* made in 1922. And some of you will perhaps recognize it as the origin film for a tremendous number of horror movies. Many people would call it the first horror movie. That may be an exaggeration or inaccurate, but it is among-- it is certainly the most influential and significant early horror film.

It's based on the Dracula story, and like Dracula itself, it tells a very strange sort of story about vampires who survived for centuries and then come into the world, and by their little sort of suggestive sexual bite in the neck of a woman, transform the women into vampires as well. And it's now a kind of commonplace established idea that this energy, that the kind of Gothic fantasy that is embodied in the story of Dracula and in so many similar ones, has its origins in various forms of sexual fantasy.

And the Dracula figure, when he kisses the woman's neck, is symbolically engaged in a sexual act. And the woman's resistance but then her transformation into a vampire is presumably the woman's transformation to sexual activeness in some way. At least these are the kinds of symbolic or underlying associations that many scholars bring to bear when they talk about why such stories were so fascinating and so popular at the end of the 19th century.

So one thing to remember about *Nosferatu* is it is an adaptation of a novel already very widely known. And in fact, there were copyright questions about *Nosferatu*. The copyright owners from the book sued the filmmakers, and I'm not sure what the outcome was. But the film did survive in any case. So here are a couple of scenes. Here is the beginning of *Nosferatu*. And the subject matter seems to me not that interesting, but again, my view is not necessarily the only view.

There are people who love these films. I don't know why they do, but I don't want to simply impose my view on you. If you're interested in this, or if you share a love of horror film-- one of my problems is I don't like horror films today, even though they've reached a very

sophisticated level. I think they're silly. I don't get them. So I'm not a good judge of them, and my negative judgments, take them with a grain of salt.

They're partly colored by my own preoccupations. There are ways I could defend my position, but I don't feel I should impose my views on you. I do think it's a silly story, and it seems to me that reality is complex enough without sort of inventing horrors that hide underground for thousands of years and emerge with magical powers. The actual horrors of reality seem to me sufficient and not adequately studied. So that's one of my objections to these forms of fantasy.

But in any case, that's personal. But in any case, what you can see in *Nosferatu*, even people who are not as interested in the subject matter, they can see what a technically innovative film it is. Watch this. Here's the beginning.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

In, fact freeze it already. Does this seem more realistic to you? Do you see already-- no fake sets? We don't feel we're watching a theatrical piece, that a camera is filming a theater piece? What's one of the reasons for that? The natural sunlight. That's natural sunlight. Go ahead. The texture of his bedding also is a factor. And of course, the sunlight is a crucial motif in the film, because Dracula lives by darkness. And the film depends, quite brilliantly, on a series of juxtapositions of light and dark, of shadow and brightness.

Now look at this. Freeze it, Kristen. Freeze it for a second. Look at this. We're really outside in a real world. Look at these animals. And you can feel the film-- at first, we're disoriented. We don't even know why are we looking here? But the film's joy-- we can feel almost the film's excitement at showing us what the real world looks like. I actually find this visually and intellectually much more exciting than a ridiculous set in which a symbolically dressed monster staggers around in a way that no one who ever walked the earth moved. I find this much more compelling.

But what was important at the time was how liberating it was, because what Murnau was showing is look what the camera can actually do. He's freeing the camera. Go ahead. OK. That's enough of this. Maybe I'll give you one more quick scene. Do we have a separate clip? Let's go to the other clip.

Now here's something from the end of the film. Can you freeze it a second? I'll sort of briefly

set the [INAUDIBLE]. This guy is Dracula's weird assistant, and he's escaped from jail. I find the story idiotic, ridiculous, totally unserious. But look at the realism visually here.

This is maybe the first time that these narrow alleyways were captured with such precision. It's almost as if, at least for me, the subject matter is irrelevant, and what the film is showing about how it can render reality is so exciting that it's as if a new universe has opened up.

And I must admit that even though there were American directors who were working with a freed camera long before this, no one ever used the camera outdoors more effectively up to this time than Murnau. And I'll show you a little more of this, even though the plot is stupid, because you can see how realistic and persuasive, compelling the visual experience is.

See the freedom of the camera to shoot down, how that changes around you? The quickness of the editing. There he is up on top of his roof. If you didn't know the context, you would see this as a form of oppression and mistreatment. Why are they going after this poor guy? And I think that is an implication of this, even though he's the source of evil. But look at the realism of this. Look at the texture of the bricks, the sense you have that this is a real place, that he really climbed down a roof. The movies.

If the movies don't do this, they have to give us a sense of that gross reality, which the movies have the power to do. They have to have very good reasons for giving up that power. It's a very rare film that can really give it up. Some animations can do it. But even surreal films, even films that exaggerate or that create alternative worlds that are not like our real worlds today have the kind of kinetic camera and sense of the textured quality of the external world that we get in those images.

So Murnau was critical to us and crucial to us for this reason, and his great masterpiece is one of the two films that I've asked you to watch tonight. We're showing both *Nosferatu* and *The Last Laugh*. Let's do it in the order of *The Last Laugh* first. I think *Nosferatu's* a less interesting film, but still from a technical standpoint, fascinating.

And those of you who are interested in the history of horror films, you should pay attention, because there's hardly a frame in *Nosferatu* that has not been alluded to or echoed in later horror films. And it is the origins of what is now a dominant movie genre, both a literary and a cinematic genre. So it's a very, very important film.

But *The Last Laugh* is a true masterpiece, and one of the reasons I think it's such a

remarkable film is that it's freed in some degree from the pretentiousness, the surreal pretentiousness of expressionism. There are expressionist elements in the film as you'll see. Very cleverly done. There's one immensely grotesque and powerful moment in which, for example, there are a series-- we are given an image of some gossiping women, who are trading gossip about the primary character.

And we'll see how interestingly Murnau handles that sequence. And there's an element of distortion or grotesquery in that. There are also elements in the film, moments in the film, brilliant moments in the film where what is shown externally is not what's happening externally, but what is going on in the mind of the primary character. In other words, it carries the principle of finding ways to create a subjective camera even further than any previous film had done.

There's one remarkable moment in this film-- watch for it. It's very astonishing-- in which the director of photography, Karl Freund, was asked to sort of figure this out. There's a moment when the protagonist gets drunk. He's very disappointed about something, and he gets drunk, and he staggers around.

And they were trying to figure out a way of dramatizing this. They played around with the camera, and they strapped the camera to the actor's waist, and when he staggered around, the world you saw was staggering too. And it created an immensely powerful sort of subjective experience for the viewer. And there are a number of other places in the film where you can see that what's being dramatized is the inner life of the characters.

So there are expressionist elements in the film, but it transcends expressionism. It becomes a film truly about reality without distortion, and of course, its basic subject is what happens to our old people when they get too old to function. This is a theme I'm beginning to find more and more sympathetic as I age.

But it's one of the most powerful treatments of this subject. And basically, the story is about-- as you'll see-- it's about a porter in a hotel whose job is to help carry baggage in. But he's an immense big man played by one of the most famous theater actors of the day, Emil Jannings.

And at a certain point in the film, as you'll see, he's demoted. He loses his job. They take his uniform away. His uniform is very important to him. And they demote him. He has to go and work in the men's room as a men's room attendant. So the film in a certain way does several things. First, it shows us what Murnau himself came to call the unchanged camera, the free

camera. And over and over again, you can see how immensely innovative the camera work in this film is.

The very opening scene of the film is a tour de force you might miss because it happened so quickly. The camera follows a person down an elevator, a glass elevator, and then follows it across the room. The camera was actually mounted on a bicycle so they could move it that way. It happens so quickly you might not even notice it, although filmmakers were overwhelmed by it, because he was doing things with the camera that no one else had done before. And you'll see other moments in the film where his use of the camera is complex and innovative.

I've already talked a bit about the themes in the film, but let me continue this. So I've said in a way it's a working class tragedy. And the very fact that it's about an ordinary man, but it tries to treat him with the kind of dignity that in the classical times kings and high born characters would receive is very significant and is a powerful aspect of the subject matter. What also develops is a deep sense of the character of the protagonist. The way in which his identity is connected to his job and how when his job, and especially his uniform, which is the symbol of his authority, is taken away, how he's unmanned, unhoused, undone, incapable of functioning.

So it's a very powerful, socially aware movie. It dramatizes character with a kind of subtlety that's very rare in silent film. You really have a sense of this man's character. It's quite a brilliant performance, even though Jannings was its theater actor, and there is something somewhat broad about his performance, you can see him beginning to adapt to the camera and to the more nuanced things that the camera can do.

But even the parts of his role that are a little sort of exaggerated make sense because there's something pretentious and pompous about his character. One of the subtlest things about the film, in fact, is the way the character has this complexity. A character for whom the audience's sympathy is constantly solicited is also imperfect, in some ways, an annoying old man, not a nice person, selfish, proud of his superiority to the other people with whom he lives.

One of the ways you could see this operating is the film really operates in two different spaces - the space of the great hotel and the space where the character played by Jannings lives. He lives in a working class ghetto, a working class part of the city. And the two environments, the hotel and the working class part of the city, are juxtaposed, and we learn about each of them

by their juxtaposition.

The working class part of the city is interesting for a number of reasons, but one of the best is the pride he takes in his uniform. He may be only a hotel porter, but in his neighborhood, he's a big man. He's a big shot, and he's very proud of himself. You can even see him boring the children and giving them instructions and things.

The most important point I'm trying to make is that he's a complex character that we learn this without dialogue through the genius of silent film, because he's both flawed and also an object of sympathy and affection. The film doesn't simplify his character. He's a spiky, unpleasant man in some ways, but we also still feel for him and recognize how terrible his tragedy is.

One of the most important characteristics of the film and the mark of what a cinematic achievement it is is that up until very close to the very end of the film, there is not a single title card, not a single use of words. In other words, the film depends upon its visual power. And you understand even complex things like the fact that the character is drunk, whether he's not thinking straight, or that what he's seeing is not reality, but some distorted version of reality. No title cards explain this to you. The film has a fluency, a visual eloquence that's very remarkable-- that's the mark of a movie maker.

But there's an interesting tip-off here. An interesting problem here is presented, and I'll end with this point. It has to do with the ending of the film, and I want you to think about this as you reflect on the film after you've watched it. I've described the basic plot of the film, and as you'll discover, this catastrophe that descends upon the protagonist of the film is reversed at the end of the movie. And see, he wins a lottery, and great good fortune descends upon him.

Don't be angry that I've given you the plot. You can't talk about film seriously without doing it, so don't be disappointed. I won't spoil movies by doing real spoilers. If I think you shouldn't know this for the experience of the film, I won't mention it. But don't be annoyed if I do this, because I need to explain this stuff to you.

So there's this reversal at the end, but it's a fake reversal. You don't really believe it. It seems inconsistent. Why do you think it's there? The film was such a downer. The original cut was such a downer that the people, the producers paying for the film said, no, no, no, you've got to put a happy ending on the movie.

So Murnau and his colleagues-- it was a collaborative process-- the screenwriter, Carl Mayer,

and the director of photography Carl [? Freund, ?] as well as the actors were all collaborating in the making of the film. They said, OK, well, what should we do? So they tacked on this happy ending.

One of the things that marks the happy ending is a title card, and the appearance of the title card is a confession or a secret signal to the real members of the audience-- this film is over. Forget this crap that's coming at the end. At least that's how I want to read it. But what you should ask yourself as you're watching the film are two things.

First-- not ask but meditate on-- first of all, this poor ending or this ending that seems to reverse. The reason the ending is bad is that the whole momentum of the film leads toward this catastrophe at the end, and to reverse it by an act of fortune like that is to deny the social and political implications and psychological implications of the story. It's a very unartistic thing to do. It violates the momentum of the text, of the trajectory of the character. So it's a bad thing.

But it is also an embodiment of an enduring issue in movie making, which is the conflict between art and commerce. Movies are commercial objects. This is hardly the only film in the history of movies to be distorted in this way. And in fact, that tension is not always negative. Sometimes forcing directors to sort of communicate with their audiences is helpful. It isn't always the case that these commercial imperatives are negative, although they often are. But this is one of those classic instances that can you think of other famous examples?

Orson Welles, the American director, was often-- suffered tremendously from this kind of pressure, because his films were thought to be unwatchable, and one of his films was cut against his will, and he lost control of his films. And he made very many fewer films than he might have made had he not been thought of as a commercial disaster by the Hollywood money people. And there are many, many other examples of this in the history of movies. One could say that this is one of the originating moments in which the conflict between art and commerce in the movies is dramatized for us.

But there's something else I want you to think about as well as you're thinking about the ending. What is the moment at the end of the film that really would end the film? Because I think there is one. It's a visually very powerful moment, but it's so bleak. It's so sad that you can understand why the money men wouldn't have liked it.

So as you're watching the film, think about all of these matters, but especially think about the

way in which Murnau discovered more fully than any director up to his time what we might call the kinetic powers of the camera. He unchained the camera. He [? liberated ?] the camera, and German film was-- world cinema, but German film especially, was never the same after that.