

TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST FILM

For: Prof. Jakobsh

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From: Frank Streicher

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I. Introduction

The dilemma one encounters whenever one attempts to discuss any aspect of German

Expressionism is that one is automatically drawn into the controversy surrounding the term

itself. Should one, for example, take the narrow approach, and talk of Expressionism simply as

an art movement that developed in Germany around the time of the first world war? Or is it

instead more advisable to interpret the term in a broader context, one that would include its

apparently ancient forerunners as well as its modern descendants? Further disagreements

arise when one attempts to explore the nature of a piece of expressionist art: should it be

defined by style, technique, and theme -- if so, how in turn are these defined -- or should we

assess it according to its historical and philosophical background, i.e. did its creator follow such

expressionistic credos as 'Aufbruch' or the Nietzsche-influenced concept of the 'Neue Mensch'.

Questions such as these must be considered when attempting to define German expressionist

film.

As in other expressionistic media, attempts have been made to narrow the definition of

expressionist film down to some common stylistic denominators, i.e. camera angles, lighting, etc.. If applied, this definition would limit the field to a handful of movies including such obvious examples as *Caligari* and *Von morgens bis mitternachts*. In this essay, however, I will follow a different approach, one that follows the argumentation of Barlow when he states that "these films [those deemed to be classical examples of expressionist film] are the most consistently expressionistic in a purely stylistic sense, but, considering the importance of the expressionistic view of the world, we will find that expressionistic aspects are present in many more films" (Barlow, 26).

German expressionist film is thus to be liberated from the confines of a strictly stylistic definition.

For this to be achieved, new parameters have to be set which will allow for the inclusion of broader criteria, i.e. the philosophy behind the work when evaluating whether or not a film can be labelled as essentially expressionistic. Subsequently, I will attempt to show, using German film as an example, that expressionist film should be viewed simply as Expressionism in film.

Naturally there exists a certain danger in this approach for, as Cardinal quite rightly points out, the term 'Expressionism' can be stretched ad infinitum (Cardinal, 1-9), which in turn would result

in a list of expressionist film so extensive as to make this essay into an absurd and meaningless exercise. Thus, in the second part of this essay, I have fashioned a definition of 'Expressionism' which, although transgressing the boundaries of stylistic content, is still heavily dependent on the traditional interpretation of the term as one that classifies that movement in the arts which emerged from pre-WWI Germany and which went on to dominate German thought and culture for the next decade. I will then attempt, in the third part of this paper, to apply this definition towards an understanding of the nature and scope of German expressionist film: using Wiene's *Caligari* I will show that while any film labelled as expressionistic should transgress purely stylistic criteria, it nevertheless must also fall within certain historical and philosophical parameters.

II. What is Expressionism?

The continuous attempts to understand and to define Expressionism have spawned a bewildering array of scholarly literature on the subject, making a comprehensive definition and

summary of existing theory next to impossible given the nature of this work¹. Furthermore, a number of issues remain largely unresolved: should, for example, Expressionism, like Impressionism, be viewed merely as another movement in art, or should one, given its tendency to blend aesthetic imperatives with political and philosophical ideas to such a degree that it transcends the traditional definition of an art movement, explain it as the manifestation of the 'Zeitgeist' of its era; the latter concepts entail a much more philosophical approach to the subject than the former.

Ongoing debates such as this one point towards an important problem that any researcher on Expressionism faces, namely that any attempt to define the term will be clearly influenced and limited by the direction and focus of one's research. In light of this, I have attempted to strike somewhat of a compromise between the different approaches to the subject matter. In order to give justice to the idea of 'Zeitgeist' , I will, in the first part of this section, examine the philosophical and political aspects of Expressionism. In contrast, the second part will focus on

¹For an interesting and clearly written summary turn to Geoffrey Perkins, Contemporary Theory of Expressionism (Bern: Verlag Herberd Lang, 1974).

how these concepts manifested themselves in the fine arts, specifically in poetry, drama, and painting.

Philosophical Background of Expressionism

In its most abstract form Expressionism had all the characteristics of a revolution: the general ideals of renewal and action (Aufbruch), epitomized by a vision of the 'Neue Mensch'. These characteristics in turn prompted an all-out attack against the existing order, in this case the Wilhelminian society. Similar to Marxism, Expressionism found its adversary in the Bourgeoisie of the time who it deemed to be too complacent, politically and socially, too nationalistic, and too enamoured with materialism and scientific advancement. To gain somewhat of an insight into the expressionistic view of bourgeois life one can turn to Sternheim's satire Die Hose: here many of the criticisms that were levelled against the German middle-class can be found. Yet even a general anti-middle class attitude cannot serve as a common denominator for the expressionist movement; thus, it was mainly the bourgeoisie that, by buying the works,

financially supported the visual arts. It is, therefore, not advisable to speak of Expressionism as anything resembling a cohesive philosophical and political unit. Although as Barlow notes it was an "artistic rebellion, an emotional outburst" that "refused to see itself confined to questions of aesthetics" it had at the same time "no program, no plan of attack or strategy. Even where it was political, it displayed no political sense or understanding of political institutions or problems" (Barlow, 18). Subsequently, politically and ideologically the expressionists were badly split: while some subscribed to the revolutionary ideas of Marxism (e.g. Ernst Toller), others expounded the philosophy of the far right². Still others looked for answers in the mythical and the spiritual realms³. It is also safe to state that many of those artists that today are classified as expressionists do not fit into any of the above mentioned categories, in that they were neither

2A recent article in Der Spiegel for example de-mythified Fritz Lang's anti-Nazi stand, and showed that, up to the moment he 'fled' Germany, the director actually had a good working relationship with the government.

3While contrasting his artistic development to that of fellow 'New Secession' artist, the painter Nolde, for example, writes: "At times I felt clumsy, backward, outdated, and angry... . For me the highest value, the form of visible life, was always inward and spiritual and incomprehensible." Taken from Victor H. Missel, ed., Voices of German Expressionism (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1970), 39.

politically driven, nor greatly influenced by any of the official credos of the movement.

The incohesiveness and fractionization apparent in expressionistic ideology is also evident in the attempts to understand Expressionism as an artistic movement: while some scholars view it as an evolution of the subjective 'I' within German art - a process that started with the poets of the 'Sturm und Drang' and which was continued first by the romantics and later by the neo-romantics -- such as Rilke -- others claim that the opposite is valid⁴. The answer to the expressionistic puzzle is likely to be found somewhere in the middle ground between the two extremes. Thus, while Expressionism did incorporate the subjective view of the world found in previous literary epochs, it did so for the most part without fleeing reality as such. Instead, the 'truth' discoveries made by the subjective 'I' were to shape the outer world in revolutionary ways.

⁴While Weisstein, for example, at one point refers to German expressionists as "twentieth-century 'Sturm und Dränger'", Bortenschlager describes expressionism as a reaction to the highly stylized and dark passivity of the neo-romantics -- a 'we' rather than an 'I' literature. Wilhelm Bortenschlager, Deutsche Literaturgeschichte - vom 1. Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart (Wien: Verlag Leitner, 1978) 11-13. Ulrich Weisstein, "Expressionism: Style or Weltanschauung?," Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon, ed. Ulrich Weisstein (Paris: Didier; Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1973) 29-45.

Yet, in order to be changed, the essence hidden within the outer reality had to be captured in order to be understood. As Pinthus puts it: "They [the Expressionists] began to dissolve the surrounding reality (Umwirklichkeit) into unreality (Unwirklichkeit), to push through appearances to the essence, to embrace and destroy the enemy in an assault of the spirit..."⁵. A duality within Expressionism subsequently emerges, for while one part of it is concerned with the discovery of the essence of the physical world -- an outward to inward movement -- the other's aim is to impregnate this outer world with ideas borne from within the subjective self -- an inward to outward movement. This duality has to be kept in mind when examining any piece of expressionistic art.

Poetry

It is poetry, rather than prose, that best exemplifies the effect of Expressionism on the literary field, for it is here that the 'revolution' left some of its more visible, and easily identifiable marks.

⁵Pinthus in György Vajtas, "Outline of the Philosophic Backgrounds of Expressionism," Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon, 48.

The nature of this essay does not allow for an extensive and complete overview of the various movements within the poetic field; however, we should note that in poetry many of the previously discussed philosophical and political ideas are well illustrated not only in their content (e.g. revolution in Paul Zech's "Cafe") but also in their form. For, as Bortenschlager points out, the expressionist poets, viewing traditional language norms as too restrictive for their message, broke traditional rules of grammar and rhythm thereby creating a new set of tools for their craft (12). Other notable characteristics of expressionist poetry were the use of bizarre metaphors, a lack of emphasis on the aesthetics of the language used, and, as part of the general movement towards abstraction, an increased use of reversed sensory perceptions, e.g. colours depicted as sounds (Bortenschlager, 13). Some of these traits are shown in a passage of Becher's "An die Völker":

Die jungen Dichter wirbeln euch Salut.
Erregte Masse. Stoff in Fluss geraten.
Koloss von ungezählten Flügeln hochgeschraubt.
Einst -: Bergklotz. Jetzt -: elastisch Monument gleitend im
Aetherraum. (Bode, 97)

Expressionism, as interpreted by the poets, entailed not only the inclusion of revolutionary

content in poetic works , but also a revolt against the the traditional form of the medium.

Drama

Drama, much like poetry, became a process increasingly dominated by the abstract: more than anything else 'the scream', the on stage outburst of emotion, has become the symbol with which expressionist plays are identified for, as Steffen states: "... it is already more than an aesthetic phenomenon. It is directed against a state of society... It demands action when faced with an analysis against which it is directed. In the scream, an emotion is reduced to its instinctive expression".⁶ Other characteristics of expressionist drama are a flexible, functional diction (especially the use of fragmented sentences⁷), a liberalized use of time, frequent use of monologues, an emphasis on the portrayal of emotion rather than action, and a tendency towards the use of stereotypes (e.g. 'Mother', 'Wife', 'Cashier'), rather than fully developed personas (Steffens, 156-158). Form, thus, was liberated to the extent that it no longer needed

⁶Wilhelm Steffens, "Drama," Phaidon Encyclopedia of Expressionism, ed. Lionel Richard (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1978), 157.

⁷*ühen. Handgelenke wie geschliffen. Schwarzhaarig - der Teint ist dunkel. ..."

to mimic external reality, giving rise to an on-stage avalanche of often abstract ideas and emotions whose purpose was to challenge and change rather than to entertain. Often the main character was viewed as espousing the philosophy of the author, the heroes often being young men revolting against the tradition of their fathers. Drama on the expressionistic stage, though in the end unsuccessful, attempted to change reality as such, either by depicting the shortcomings of the German society of the period, or by actively espousing an alternate version of reality, i.e. the 'neue Mensch' (Steffens, 158-161). One should note, however, that far from being a cohesive unit, expressionist dramatists differed greatly in their approach to the topic: one need only compare Sternheim's work to that of Kaiser or Toller to recognize that what is labelled as expressionistic form and content is found in various degrees within the works of that period.

Painting

The term 'Expressionism' in German art was first used only in connection with painting, probably

originating at the 1911 exhibition of the 'Berlin Secession'. Although preceded by, and rooted in the works of Van Gaugh, Matisse, and Münch, expressionist painting fully evolved as a distinct movement when german based groups of painters, such as 'die Brücke' and 'der Blaue Reiter' took up its cause. In essence, works labelled as expressionistic were those that no longer attempted to reproduce the external reality on canvas. Instead, the 'inner reality' now was seen as the only worthwhile subject, or as Walden puts it: 'what the painter paints is what he perceives in his inner most senses, it is the expression of his being; all that is transitory is for him only a symbol: his own life is his most important consideration...'⁸

Outwardly this artistic revolution was marked by "distortion, deformation, exaltation, exacerbation, and intensive expression" (Richard, 12). This was achieved with the use of sharp contrasts, unmixed colours, unrefined strokes, as well as spontaneity in execution (Barlow, 19). Inspired by the simplicity and expressiveness of primitive art, the expressionists attempted to mimic some of its qualities which, for example, accounts for the popularity of the wood-cut. Yet,

⁸Quote found in Lionel Richard, "The Expressionist Movement," [Phaidon encyclopedia of Expressionism](#), 9.

as in other media, the forms that these artistic expressions took on varied greatly, in many ways reflecting the divisions found in the movement as a whole.

III. Expressionism and Expressionist Film

Far from approaching completeness, our examination of the aspects of Expressionism have nevertheless demonstrated that the expressionistic movement, unlike some of its predecessors, cannot easily be explained or categorized one way or another: too many internal divisions exist to make a comprehensive and accurate definition possible. What has also emerged is that style alone cannot be viewed as the sole factor by which an expressionistic piece of art should be judged; if for example one broadens the stylistic definition to encompass any work of art that in one way or another rejects mimesis of reality, one would be forced to include such diverse artistic movements as futurism, cubism, post-modernism, surrealism, as well as all aspects of primitive and folk art, under the banner of Expressionism. A purely stylistic approach could, on

the other hand, also result in the exclusion of artists traditionally labelled as expressionists; Sternheim, for example, made little use of the abstract when satirising German middle-class life. Thus, until a satisfactory stylistic definition of expressionist art is formed, one that is neither too broad nor too restrictive, other options have to be considered. One might, for example, use the time-frame/geographical approach, labelling those works of art as expressionistic that were created in northern Europe, mostly in Germany between 1910 and 1925. The drawbacks of this line of argumentation are numerous for it would exclude many of the later works of prominent expressionistic artists (e.g. some of Lasker-Schüler's poems and drawings) as well as include artists that showed no philosophical or stylistic tendencies towards Expressionism. Nevertheless it can still be used as an aid towards a comprehensive definition. Another more feasible path might be to balance style with elements of what is sometimes referred to as the 'Zeitgeist' of the expressionistic era -- much of which falls under the previously discussed heading of philosophy. This line of reasoning is of a highly flexible nature since it makes allowances for a variety of styles covering a wider time span, while at the same time somewhat limiting the

number of works that can be labelled as expressionistic; e.g. while Lasker-Schüler's post 1925 work could still be labelled expressionistic because the poetess was still endowed with the original expressionist 'spirit', Grass' works, although utilizing some expressionist techniques, would not, since any connection to the original 'Zeitgeist' is virtually non-existent.

A similar case can be made for film: Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) although created at a date that some scholars consider post-expressionistic (e.g. Barlow, 119) it nevertheless contains enough stylistic as well as philosophical attributes to be classified as an expressionist work of art⁹. In contrast, Bergman's highly 'expressionistic' film *Persona* should not be labelled as such for it lacks any spiritual connection to the original era; one might, instead, choose to label it as neo-expressionistic much as one would refer to some of Rilke's work as neo-romantic.¹⁰

⁹Many scholars will debate this film's expressionist label for Lang himself did not view himself as being an expressionist (Barlow, 109). Still arguments can and have been made to justify this inclusion, for consciously or not Lang did carry on the expressionistic spirit (e.g. the theme of oppression in *Metropolis*, albeit a 'watered-down version').

¹⁰A precedent for a similar neologism already exists. Cardinal, for example, refers to the COBRA group, also known as the New York movement of Abstract Expressionism whose works emerged well after the death of Expressionism proper. (Cardinal, 7)

In the last two paragraphs I have argued that the use of certain stylistic devices is not enough to label a film as expressionistic. This stance must be modified somewhat, for in many cases these elements do serve as indicators for the expressionist nature of a work. In other words any film found to contain expressionist style should temporarily be labelled as expressionistic until such time that, using the previously described 'Zeitgeist' guidelines, it is proved otherwise. A question that subsequently arises is whether or not a film can be labelled as expressionistic if it does not contain any expressionist devices? Mack's *Studenten von Prag* seems to prove that it can be so, although my research has indicated that, unlike in other media, style and 'Zeitgeist' are for the most part invariably linked. Still, this remains a bone of contention, one that warrants further investigation at a later date.

Having elaborated on the role of style in examining expressionist film, a brief examination of stylistic devices is now warranted. As in the other art forms the goal of the expressionist film is to portray how the inner world views and shapes outer reality. Yet, in film, any such attempt runs into difficulties not encountered in the other media (with the exception of theatre), for

cinematography, by its nature, is essentially reality bound: the filmmaker -- unlike the painter, for example, whose creative parameters are limited only by his/her imagination -- must use real objects (e.g. actors, sets), even when depicting the surreal. Subsequently, when attempting to duplicate the expressionist mindset on celluloid, reality has to be literally distorted using a variety of mechanisms, a useful list of which is cited by Barlow. According to him the following elements make up the expressionist filmmaker's stylistic repertoire: exaggerated acting that portrays extreme emotional intensity, fantastic sets that do not attempt to mimic the real world, violent camera movements and distortive angles, an extensive use of light and shadow, and, in order to emphasize the subjective worldview, the reduction of secondary characters to functions of the main character (Barlow, 25). It should be added that this list reflects only those cinematographic devices that were available in the 1920's and 1930's -- modern neo-expressionist filmmakers could enhance many of the original effects by making extensive use of advanced technology.

Recognizing and analyzing these distinctively expressionistic stylistic devices constitutes one

possible approach towards expressionist film. Yet, as previously argued, such a step must be followed by a more detailed examination of the work at hand. Only if the film transcends purely stylistic links, and is shown to incorporate a deeper historic-philosophical connection, only then should it be termed expressionistic. What follows, then, is an example of how any such investigation should proceed.

Case study: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*

The Stylistic Evidence

Wiene's *Caligari* has traditionally been viewed as the showcase for German expressionist film, in that it entails many prime examples of expressionistic cinematographic devices, all of which are aimed at enhancing the subjective experience by distorting objective reality. Thus, the abstract, grossly distorted set -- theatrical rather than cinematographical in nature -- gives early notice that the viewer has entered a different conceptual framework, one shaped by extreme emotions

rather than by the laws of the physical world. Other factors seem to directly support this stance. Time, for example, no longer can serve as a concrete measuring tool, for it is unclear whether Francis' story takes place in real time or whether it is the creation of a madman dreamed up in a brief flash of lunatic inspiration. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the medieval and the modern Caligari gives the film a sense of timelessness which complements the film's general theme of oppression. Still another device used to directly oppose the connection to the physical world is the use of disproportionate and distorted props, e.g. the chairs, which according to Barlow are very much connected to Francis' frame of mind (Barlow, 36). These elements combined with the other expressionistic devices used, e.g. the use of expressionist acting method¹¹, the light-shadow contrast, and lettering superimposed onto the film, all support the initial assumption that one is dealing with an expressionist film.

¹¹The extent of expressionistic acting in *Caligari* remains a point of contention. Eisner, for example, argues that only Werner Krauss (the diabolic doctor) and Conrad Veidt (Cesare) succeed in giving an expressionist performance. Lotte H. Eisner, " A Contribution to the definition of Expressionist Film," Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon, p. 164.

The Connective Aspects

Having established expressionist stylistic content, historic-philosophic connections to the expressionist period must now be forged. In the case of *Caligari* this connection is a relatively simple task, one geared towards serving as an example to future case studies of this type, rather than fully exploring the wide ranging discussions surrounding the work.

Historically Wiene's work provides many links to the expressionist movement. Shot in 1919 towards what is traditionally viewed as the end of the expressionist era, Wiene could still draw on creative resources from other fields for the expressionist content of his film. The set, for example -- designed by Hermann Warm, who at one point worked at the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf -- shows deep ties to expressionist painting, i.e. the woodcut (Barlow, 40).

Furthermore, both Werner Krauss in the role of the director as well as Conrad Veidt as Cesare were well acquainted with the expressionist stage, both for example having acted in the 1918 production of Reinhold Goering's "Seeschlacht"¹². Also of note is that Carl Mayer, co-author

¹²For more information on the direct connection between the expressionist stage and "Caligari"

along with Hans Janowitz, of the *Caligari* script, has for at least part of his creative life, been labelled as an Expressionist, albeit a realistic rather than a surrealistic one. Such information subsequently shows that a strong historical bond between Wiene's work and the expressionist movement as a whole does indeed exist.

Yet the connection to the expressionist movement does not rely on historical links alone for viewing *Caligari* one quickly realizes that here much of what is referred to as the expressionist spirit can be rediscovered. The dominance of the subjective viewpoint created by Francis' madness, for example, reflects what Barlow calls "the expressionistic notion that the ultimate reality of things will appear distorted and insane to the healthy reason of practical affairs" (Barlow, 35). The very fact that Wiene refused to mimic reality in itself indicates a strong connection to the contemporary philosophy of anti-realism. Opposition to the bourgeoisie and its militaristic trappings seems also to be in evidence, although the degree to which it is present is still shrouded in some controversy (caused mainly by the debate surrounding the frame story:

turn to Annalisa Viviani, Dramaturgische Elemente Im Expressionistischen Drama, (Bonn: H.Bouvier u. CO. Verlag, 1970), 54-57.

see Barlow, 31-34). Whether or not *Caligari* can and should be viewed as a work infused with certain expressionist political ideologies remains a point of contention. It is also of little importance to the general development of this study, for sufficient historic-philosophic evidence has already been presented to reach a final conclusion.

Conclusion

Stylistic, historical, as well as philosophical evidence allows us to conclude that Wiene's *Caligari* can be labelled as an expressionist film. Although, as previously indicated, the work under discussion is considered as a showpiece for expressionist film -- thus, from the beginning no real doubt existed as to its expressionistic nature -- it nevertheless served as an example of how certain criteria might be applied towards any future classification of film.

IV. CONCLUSION

The goal of this essay was to expand the small list of films that are traditionally labelled as

Expressionist, while at the same time avoiding the pit-fall of overinclusion. By originally assuming that expressionist film is Expressionism in film -- a procedure for which 'Expressionism' had, in turn, to be clearly defined -- I was forced to create a mechanism by which expressionist criteria could be identified in film. While the *Caligari* case study at least partially fulfilled this purpose, it also served as an example of how the list of expressionist films could be kept to a reasonable limit. It can be argued that, in essence, I have not transgressed the traditional somewhat intuitive view of Expressionism as a movement that dominated the period in Europe between 1910 and 1925. This to some degree is certainly true, for what started as a broad assumption had to be, in the end, narrowed down somewhat. This movement mirrors some of the described problems surrounding the term as a whole, which in turn can only be overcome by creating systematic guidelines by which Expressionism itself can be accurately defined and by which the degree of expressionist content within a work of art can be determined. Ultimately, it is to this process that I tried to contribute in this essay.

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