



**Frances Guerin.** *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. xxxiv + 314 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-4286-1; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4285-4.



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## Light Reflections

Any study that promises to redefine the field of German film scholarship treads on dangerous ground. This is particularly true of studies that, like this one, proposes to move beyond the socio-psychology and historical teleology of Siegfried Kracauer by presenting a similarly reductivist argument, in this case concerning the self-reflexive qualities of 1920s German film as manifested in its approach to light and lighting. The difficulty is to reclaim light as a discursive phenomenon without succumbing to essentializing categories and allegorical readings. Guerin proceeds by using a tripartite definition of light as “the material, subject, and referent of filmic representation” (p. xiv) and by situating her analyses within the cultural manifestations of technological modernity: “The book argues that the central conflict of a technological modernism—the conflict between the utopian aspiration for mythical cohesion and the recognition of the material rupture brought about by industrialization—becomes transposed in the narrative films” (p. xxxii). But what does this mean? On a formal level, the same argument has been made about the symbolism of crystal and glass in expressionist architecture. However, without any references to the artistic vi-

sions, iconographic traditions, institutional frameworks, philosophical debates, social developments, technological advances, and/or multi-media references that are usually cited to explain such symbolic investments, all of the weight of the argument must fall on interpretative strategies and hermeneutic moves. With Weimar cinema thus reduced to a veritable hall of mirrors, a self-reflexive reflection on the modernity of film, the result must be described as a missed opportunity.

Guerin’s selection of films remains largely within the expressionist canon, even if they are not presented as such. The first chapter describes the intense preoccupation with light in art, architecture, theater, photography, and cinema of the Wilhelmine period and allows Guerin to outline the larger issues in terms of historical continuities and discursive traditions. The dynamics of mythological past and technological innovation are reconstructed through a famous *Kammerspielfilm* like *Schatten* and the unjustly forgotten science fiction fantasy, *Algol*. The author examines the famous trick sequences in *Faust*, the film-inside-the-film scenes of *Der Golem* and *Siegfried*, and the light birth of the female

robot in *Metropolis* for their belief in light as a form of modern magic and a reflection on historical time. The formative power of light in creating the divided mise-en-scènes of exterior and interior, public and private space inspires the most convincing chapter on two street films, *Die StraÙe* and *Jenseits der StraÙe*, and the rural melodrama *Am Rande der Welt*. Finally, the trapeze act in *Variety* and the illuminated city streets of *Sylvester* allow the author to consider the role of light in the representation of other forms of mass entertainment.

At best, *A Culture of Light* can be described as an elaboration on Lotte Eisner's comments in *The Haunted Screen* on chiaroscuro lighting and the symbolic investment of light and shadow as important characteristics of expressionist cinema. Guerin's detailed analysis certainly works in this tradition. At worst, the almost exclusive focus on the formal, narrative, and discursive function of light leads to vague philosophical speculation about "technological modernity" and "a new industrialized way of life," terms that are used without much specificity and concreteness. No effort is made to define this small group of expressionist films against the wide range of genres and styles developed in 1920s German cinema or to account for the considerable shifts in lighting and light symbolism from the early to the late 1920s. As for its intellectual debts and theoretical alliances, Guerin's book is difficult to place. Her thematic focus and methodological approach seems to treat Weimar cinema as a self-reflexive art cinema, but without the modernist sensibilities explored by Thomas Elsaesser in *Weimar Cinema and After* (2000). Her treatment of light as an almost material force suggests affinities with histories like Wolfgang Schivelbusch's study of the industrialization of light in *Disenchanted Night* or Christoph Asendorf's work on electricity and modern perception in *Batteries of Life* but lacks both their interest in the history of technology and the technology of perception. Like several of the authors in *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*, a new anthology edited by Dietrich Scheunemann, Guerin wants

to reclaim 1920s German film for formalist readings and aesthetic experiences. But the author weakens her argument by remaining largely silent about the films as *works of art*—we learn almost nothing about directors, actors, and producers—and by making no references to the extensive metaphors of light in then-contemporary writings on visuality, spirituality, and the enlightenment project. Moreover, she repeatedly undermines her hermeneutic project by adding overly general digressions on the history of electrification or the affinities between female sexuality and big city life and by concluding her attempt to unlock "the dubious link" between Weimar film and fascism with, of all things, Speer's light architecture of the Nazi party conventions.

As has been shown by the work of Thomas Elsaesser, Anton Kaes, Patrice Petro, Rick McCormick, and others, the self-reflectivity of Weimar cinema requires critical detachment—which also means, some grounding in a discursive practice outside of self-reflexivity—in order to be fully appreciated as a contribution and response to Weimar modernity. Unfortunately, the approach taken by Guerin has left this reader at a loss, and that despite the extensive annotations and comprehensive bibliography. Perhaps more thorough editing would have eliminated some of the circular arguments and vague generalizations (not to mention the misspellings of names) and brought the underlying issues (i.e., concerning the complicated relationships among cinema, technology, and modernity) into greater focus. Guerin is an effective close reader of frame compositions and dramatic mise-en-scènes but her insights about individual films remain buried under bold claims that do not become more convincing just because they are being repeated. In the end, the main problem with the book derives from its disconnection from the larger questions about aesthetics and ideology, art and society that account for the continuing relevance of Weimar cinema and that alone will bring new perspectives to German film scholarship.

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