

A CULTURE OF LIGHT: CINEMA AND TECHNOLOGY IN 1920s GERMANY

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Frances Guerin begins *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* by reminding us that there is a long tradition within representation



that is central to the understanding of the coherence of light and lighting. Generally, as she states, approaches are grouped under two umbrellas. On the one hand, from Plato through the Middle Ages and into the 19th century, light was put in the service of mystical and mythical narratives that searched for metaphysical truth. In these representations, light was characteristically the symbol of truth and knowledge. In 19th-century representation, in particular, light was juxtaposed with darkness to signify the possibility of a truth defined by social integration, freedom from the burdens of everyday life and the attainment of spiritual wisdom. Conversely, from Euclid through Galileo to Einstein and the quantum physicists, the study of light has functioned within the realm of science as an integral component of efforts to empirically and quantitatively gain knowledge of the physical world. Relationships between light and darkness, in this realm, exist within the physical world rather than referencing realms beyond our grasp. The mythical and scientific trajectories have evoked societal tensions, as they did in German art and cinema of the 1920s.

While this tension per se is not Guerin's specific focus as she surveys the culture of light, it becomes clear that this culture developed in a way that played with the tension. More specifically, she argues that German silent cinema manipulates light and lighting to represent and interact with transformations of space, conceptions of time and history, modes of representation and the flourishing entertainment industry in 1920s Germany. While acknowledging that German cinema was not as well developed as that of France or the United States, the book conveys that it shared their urbanity. We also find that German narrative film of the 1920s enthusiastically embraced the products of late industrialization when they deployed light and lighting in all their variant possibilities. Indeed, the book's balancing of light and lighting highlights the combination as a single aspect of the mise-en-scène. This point is so well argued that the text retains the magic of cinematic effect and grasps the elusive relation-

ship between films and the people who produce them.

Throughout the volume, the book's organization works in its favor. Chapter One sets the stage. Here the author provides a detailed account of historical and artistic connections between film's articulation of light and lighting and those in other media. This foundational section places 1920s German film within the development of a Modernist aesthetic in Europe. In Chapter 2, Guerin introduces a number of films from the 1910s, which provides some continuity between pre- and post-World War I projects. Against this background, she is also able to speak of technological modernity in Germany and to demonstrate the roots of themes later explored in depth by 1920s filmmakers. Her argument here is that films such as *Und das Licht Erlosch* foreground manipulations in light and lighting within the framed composition, narrative structure and fulcrum around which thematic issues turn.

Chapters 3–6 are the meat of the study. Analyzing the use of light in 11 films, the author moves, in each case, from a discussion of the filmic use of light and lighting for compositional purposes through the unfolding of the story to the engagement with transformations in social and cultural life that resulted from technological modernity in Germany. I was fascinated by Guerin's ability to make me envision how the culture evolved and how deftly she paired the films and the events that marked the period. *Algol* (1920) and *Schatten* (1923) use light and lighting in self-conscious ways. Referencing these projects, she opens a discussion of the kinds of transformations that are brought to visual representation with the invention of electrical lighting and other industrial developments. Some films (e.g. *Faust*, *Der Golem Siegfried*) provide a gateway in the discussions of the cinema's involvement in and reconfiguration of historical time. Others (e.g. *Die Straße*, *Jenseits der Straße*, *Am Rande der Welt*) examine how electrical lighting and the cinema redefined public and private space. The book also looks at the social impact of technically produced light when it is integrated into the formation of a modern leisure industry. What was particularly enriching was the way the book weaved the German tradition into the story lines. Historical contrasts of light and darkness are evident in the culture's literature and philosophy (e.g. Goethe). Looking at how these themes enter the cinematic narrative and are updated by the cinematic approach is fascinating. Equally wonderful is the way in which the "German mind" is evident in the new landscape.

Another plus is the author's ability to reach toward other fields of scholarship and to reach beyond the boundaries of German film history. These sections strengthen the research immensely, allowing Guerin to foreground technical experiments that demonstrate how 1920s German cinema reflected the nation's identity even as it looked beyond national boundaries for inspiration. Perhaps the high point of the book is the author's ability to convey how 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. This provided a context for German silent film to engage with its historical world. Also

impressive were the sections that looked at the influence of specific individuals (e.g. Moholy-Nagy).

Frances Guerin's *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* reminds us of the historical tension among views of light, even while reflecting both the opportunities and anxieties surrounding modernity and democracy. Her decision to separate German film from political history serves her well. It allows this study to feature the international flavor of the German works and to underline their particularity as well. Although a few more visuals would have allowed the reader to savor the information more, the book is a fine contribution as it stands. Turning to films such as *Schatten* (1923), *Variety* (1925), *Metropolis* (1926), and *Der Golem* (1920), Guerin's history of early German film between the two world wars allows us to perceive the films she presents on their own terms. Rather than portraying the *mise-en-scène* as a foundation for Nazism, a more typical approach, she encourages us to ask how the original use of lighting elevates the medium, narrative and art form. In addition, and perhaps ironically, although the author puts philosophy and science aside as she delves into 1920s German film, the tensions between the mythical and the empirical remain resonant in the representations of a new and industrialized way of life. Similarly, the multiplicity of meanings we give to the term "light" remain evident, as do distinctions that are critical to cinema. Throughout, the reader can appreciate that cinema is a product of light that manipulates lighting for effect. In sum, this book encourages us to appreciate the innovative and aesthetic aspects of 1920s German film. It is a fine addition to scholarship in this area.

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