GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM IN FILM

Beginnings

Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919/20), designed in an Expressionist style, became a critical and commercial success particularly in the U.S. and in France, where "Caligarisme" became synonymous with Expressionist cinema. Expressionism was an avant-garde movement which had begun in painting (about 1905); it was then taken up in theater, literature, architecture, and finally in film. Three designers—Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, Walter Röhrig—were responsible for the Expressionist style of *Caligari.* In this film, stylization functions to "express" the distorted viewpoint of a madman: We see the world as the mad narrator does; the film becomes a projection of his vision. Expressionist visual style was later invoked to create similar situations for horror and fantasy stories (*The Golem*, 1920; *Nosferatu*, 1922; *Waxworks*, 1924), crime thrillers (*Dr. Mabuse* trilogy, 1922/33; *M*, 1931), melodramas (*Variety*, 1923), social dramas (*Joyless Street*, 1925), and historical epics (*Nibelungen*, 1924).

Style

The "German style." Emphasis on design or *mise-en-scène*, uncanny atmosphere, and composition (less on story and editing, unlike Hollywood). "The film image must become graphic art" (Hermann Warm).

Expressionism = Stylization that abstracts and transforms reality as we know it (from the conventions of realistic art) through
- photography (unexpected camera angles, little camera movement)
- lighting (stark contrasts of light and shadow for various effects)
- totally artificial, stylized sets ("paintings come to life"), stripped of all realistic details and psychology—sets that become symbolic diagrams of emotional states
- overtly theatrical (anti-naturalist) acting style (actors move in jerky, slow, sinuous patterns) and heavy make-up
- integration of all elements of *mise-en-scène* to create an overall composition

Such Expressionist techniques aim to
- abstract from realistic details and contingencies
- bring out the "essence" of an object, situation, or state of being
- express a subjective viewpoint
- evoke mystery, alienation, disharmony, hallucination, dreams, extreme emotional states, destabilization

Expressionist film in the 1920s is based on the premise that film becomes art only to the extent that the film image differs from empirical reality: "The world is there: Why repeat it?" The "formative" power of film was seen in its ability to
- resignify and rework reality (not merely record it)
- construct a self-contained aesthetic and symbolic world of the imagination radically detached from the everyday

Legacy

After the end of inflation in 1924, Weimar reality stabilized and films sought to be realistic, objective, documentary (in accordance with the cool, sober "New Objectivity" in painting, photography, and literature). Introduction of sound after 1928 forced films to become more "realistic." Notable exceptions: Murnau's *Faust* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (both 1926) were the last major Expressionist films, both excessive in their production values. Hollywood became interested in the German style. Filmmakers (Lubitsch, Murnau), actors (Jannings, Veidt, Dietrich), cameramen (Karl Freund), were lured to Hollywood.

Expressionism has been interpreted as
- a challenge to our habitual perception of reality (liberating in the sense that we see the world not as given or fixed but as constantly changing);
- a protest against the "duplication" of empirical reality (liberation at least in the aesthetic realm);
- an exploration of film's materiality, i.e. its difference as a medium (experiments with expressive lighting effects, subjective camera, design that externalizes the character's inner thoughts);
- a foregrounding of the signifier (showing film to be a constructed object designed to make things, sets, and actors signify/express something);
- a way to imbue inanimate objects and sets with "life" (colored by the subjective vision of characters in distress or gripped by insanity, paranoia, insecurity, disorientation), to let objects "speak"

Expressionist techniques—unrealistic sets, theatrical composition, lighting, self-conscious or obtrusive camera—live on in Surrealist film, avant-garde cinema, horror films, and in American *film noir* of the 1940 and 1950s.