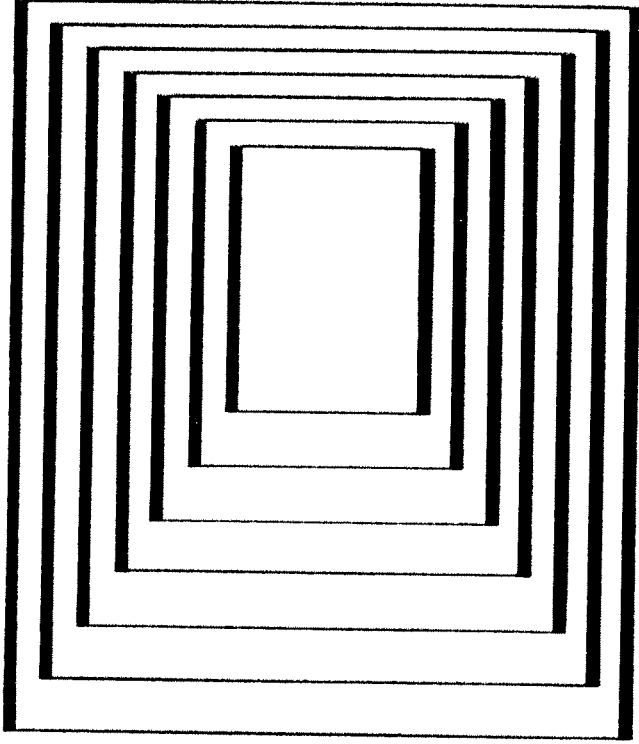


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**FROM CALIGARI TO HITLER**

**A PSYCHOLOGICAL HISTORY**

**OF THE GERMAN FILM**

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

WHEN, from 1920 on, German films began to break the boycott established by the Allies against the former enemy, they struck New York, London and Paris audiences as achievements that were as puzzling as they were fascinating.<sup>1</sup> Archetype of all forthcoming postwar films, *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* aroused passionate discussions. While one critic called it "the first significant attempt at the expression of a creative mind in the medium of cinematography,"<sup>2</sup> another stated: "It has the odor of tainted food. It leaves a taste of cinders in the mouth."<sup>3</sup> In exposing the German soul, the postwar films seemed to make even more of a riddle of it. Macabre, sinister, morbid: these were the favorite adjectives used in describing them.

With the passage of time the German movies changed themes and modes of representation. But despite all changes they preserved certain traits typical of their sensational start—even after 1924, a year considered the beginning of a long period of decline. In the appraisal of these traits complete unanimity has been reached among American and European observers. What they most admire is the talent with which, from the time of *CALIGARI*, German film directors marshaled the whole visual sphere: their outspoken feeling for impressive settings, their virtuosity in developing action through appropriate lighting. Connoisseurs also appreciate the conspicuous part played in German films by a camera which the Germans were the first to render completely mobile. In addition, there is no expert who would not acknowledge the organizational power operative in these films—a collective discipline which accounts for the unity of

<sup>1</sup> Lubitsch's historical costume film *PASSION*—the first German production to be brought to this country—was shown at New York late in 1920. In April 1921, there followed the New York release of *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI*.

<sup>2</sup> Rotha, *Film Till Now*, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Amiguet, *Cinéma/ Cinema*, p. 87.

narrative as well as for the perfect integration of lights, settings and actors.<sup>4</sup> Owing to such unique values, the German screen exerted world-wide influence, especially after the total evolution of its studio and camera devices in *THE LAST LAUGH* (1924) and *VARIETY* (1925). "It was the German camera-work (in the fullest sense of that term) which most deeply impressed Hollywood."<sup>5</sup> In a characteristic expression of respect, Hollywood hired all the German film directors, actors and technicians it could get its hands on. France, too, proved susceptible to screen manners on the other side of the Rhine. And the classic Russian films benefited by the German science of lighting.<sup>6</sup>

Admiration and imitation, however, need not be based on intrinsic understanding. Much has been written about the German cinema, in a continual attempt to analyze its exceptional qualities and, if possible, to solve the disquieting problems bound up with its existence. But this literature, essentially aesthetic, deals with films as if they were autonomous structures. For example, the question as to why it was in Germany that the camera first reached complete mobility has not even been raised. Nor has the evolution of the German cinema been grasped. Paul Rotha, who along with the collaborators of the English film magazine *Close Up* early recognized the artistic merits of German films, confines himself to a merely chronological scheme. "In surveying the German cinema from the end of the war until the coming of the American dialogue film," he says, "the output may roughly be divided into three groups. Firstly, the theatrical costume picture; secondly, the big middle period of the studio art films; and thirdly, the decline of the German film in order to fall into line with the American 'picture-sense' output."<sup>7</sup> Why these three groups of films were bound to follow each other, Rotha does not try to explain. Such external accounts are the rule. They lead straight into dangerous misconceptions. Attributing the decline after 1924 to the exodus of important German film people and American interference in German film business, most authors dispose of the German pictures of the time by qualifying them as "Americanized" or "international-

ized" products.<sup>8</sup> It will be seen that these allegedly "Americanized" films were in fact true expressions of contemporaneous German life. And, in general, it will be seen that the technique, the story content, and the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the actual psychological pattern of this nation.

## II

The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media for two reasons:

First, films are never the product of an individual. The Russian film director Pudovkin emphasizes the collective character of film production by identifying it with industrial production: "The technical manager can achieve nothing without foremen and workmen and their collective effort will lead to no good result if every collaborator limits himself only to a mechanical performance of his narrow function. Team work is that which makes every, even the most insignificant, task a part of the living work and organically connects it to the general task."<sup>9</sup> Prominent German film directors shared these views and acted accordingly. Watching the shooting of a film directed by G. W. Pabst in the French Joinville studios, I noticed that he readily followed the suggestions of his technicians as to details of the settings and the distribution of lights. Pabst told me that he considered contributions of that kind invaluable. Since any film production unit embodies a mixture of heterogeneous interests and inclinations, teamwork in this field tends to exclude arbitrary handling of screen material, suppressing individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people.<sup>10</sup>

Second, films address themselves, and appeal, to the anonymous multitude. Popular films—or, to be more precise, popular screen motifs—can therefore be supposed to satisfy existing mass desires. It has occasionally been remarked that Hollywood manages to sell films which do not give the masses what they really want. In this opinion Hollywood films more often than not stultify and misdirect a public persuaded by its own passivity and by overwhelming publicity into accepting them. However, the distorting influence of

<sup>4</sup> Bardèche and Brasillach, *History of Motion Pictures*, p. 288 ff.; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, pp. 161-62; Rotha, *Film Till Now*, pp. 176-77; Jeanne, "Le Cinéma Allemand," *L'Art Cinématographique*, VIII, 42 ff.; etc.

<sup>5</sup> Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, p. 186.  
<sup>10</sup> Balázs, *Der Geist des Films*, pp. 187-88.

<sup>4</sup> Rotha, *Film Till Now*, pp. 177-78; Barry, *Program Notes*, Series I, program 4, and Series III, program 2; Potamkin, "Kino and Lichtspiel," *Close Up*, Nov. 1929, p. 888; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, pp. 189-90.  
<sup>5</sup> Barry, *Program Notes*, Series I, program 4.  
<sup>6</sup> Jahier, "42 Ans de Cinéma," *Le Rôle intellectuel du Cinéma*, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Rotha, *Film Till Now*, p. 177.—It should be noted that Rotha expresses the views then held of the German movies by French and English film aesthetes, although his book is more vigorous and perceptive than those which had preceded it.

Hollywood mass entertainment should not be overrated. The manipulator depends upon the inherent qualities of his material; even the official Nazi war films, pure propaganda products as they were, mirrored certain national characteristics which could not be fabricated.<sup>11</sup> What holds true of them applies all the more to the films of a competitive society. Hollywood cannot afford to ignore spontaneity on the part of the public. General discontent becomes apparent in waning box-office receipts, and the film industry, vitally interested in profit, is bound to adjust itself, so far as possible, to the changes of mental climate.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, American audiences receive what Hollywood wants them to want; but in the long run public desires determine the nature of Hollywood films.<sup>13</sup>

### III

What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness. Of course, popular magazines and broadcasts, bestsellers, ads, fashions in language and other sedimentary products of a people's cultural life also yield valuable information about predominant attitudes, widespread inner tendencies. But the medium of the screen exceeds these sources in inclusiveness.

Owing to diverse camera activities, cutting and many special devices, films are able, and therefore obliged, to scan the whole visible world. This effort results in what Erwin Panofsky in a memorable lecture defined as the "dynamization of space": "In a movie theater . . . the spectator has a fixed seat, but only physically. . . . Aesthetically, he is in permanent motion, as his eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera which permanently shifts in distance and direction. And the space presented to the spectator is as movable as the spectator is himself. Not only do solid bodies move in space, but space itself moves, changing, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See the analyses of these films in the Supplement.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Farrell, "Will the Commercialization of Publishing Destroy Good Writing?" *New Directions*, 9, 1946, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> In pre-Hitler Germany, the film industry was less concentrated than in this country. Ufa was preponderant without being omnipotent, and smaller companies carried on beside the bigger ones. This led to a diversity of products, which intensified the reflective function of the German screen.

<sup>14</sup> Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," *transitron*, 1937, pp. 124-25.

In the course of their spatial conquests, films of fiction and films of fact alike capture innumerable components of the world they mirror: huge mass displays, casual configurations of human bodies and inanimate objects, and an endless succession of unobtrusive phenomena. As a matter of fact, the screen shows itself particularly concerned with the unobtrusive, the normally neglected. Preceding all other cinematic devices, close-ups appeared at the very beginning of the cinema and continued to assert themselves throughout its history. "When I got to directing films," Erich von Stroheim told an interviewer, "I would work day and night, without food, without sleeping sometimes, to have every detail perfect, even to descriptions of how facial expressions should change."<sup>15</sup> Films seem to fulfill an innate mission in ferreting out minutiae.

Inner life manifests itself in various elements and conglomerations of external life, especially in those almost imperceptible surface data which form an essential part of screen treatment. In recording the visible world—whether current reality or an imaginary universe—films therefore provide clues to hidden mental processes. Surveying the era of silent films, Horace M. Kallen points to the revealing function of close-ups: "Slight actions, such as the incidental play of the fingers, the opening or clenching of a hand, dropping a handkerchief, playing with some apparently irrelevant object, stumbling, falling, seeking and not finding and the like, became the visible hieroglyphs of the unseen dynamics of human relations. . . ." <sup>16</sup> Films are particularly inclusive because their "visible hieroglyphs" supplement the testimony of their stories proper. And permeating both the stories and the visuals, the "unseen dynamics of human relations" are more or less characteristic of the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge.

That films particularly suggestive of mass desires coincide with outstanding box-office successes would seem a matter of course. But a hit may cater only to one of many coexisting demands, and not even to a very specific one. In her paper on the methods of selection of films to be preserved by the Library of Congress, Barbara Deming elaborates upon this point: "Even if one could figure out . . . which were the most popular films, it might turn out that in saving those at the top, one would be saving the same dream over and over again . . . and losing other dreams which did not happen to appear in the

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, "Erich von Stroheim. . ." *New York Times*, June 22, 1941.

<sup>16</sup> Kallen, *Art and Freedom*, II, 809.

most popular individual pictures but did appear over and over again in a great number of cheaper, less popular pictures."<sup>17</sup> What counts is not so much the statistically measurable popularity of films as the popularity of their pictorial and narrative motifs. Persistent reiteration of these motifs marks them as outward projections of inner urges. And they obviously carry most symptomatic weight when they occur in both popular and unpopular films, in grade B pictures as well as in superproductions. This history of the German screen is a history of motifs pervading films of all levels.

#### IV

To speak of the peculiar mentality of a nation by no means implies the concept of a fixed national character. The interest here lies exclusively in such collective dispositions or tendencies as prevail within a nation at a certain stage of its development. What fears and hopes swept Germany immediately after World War I? Questions of this kind are legitimate because of their limited range; incidentally, they are the only ones which can be answered by an appropriate analysis of the films of the time. In other words, this book is not concerned with establishing some national character pattern allegedly elevated above history, but it is concerned with the psychological pattern of a people at a particular time. There is no lack of studies covering the political, social, economic and cultural history of the great nations. I propose to add to these well-known types that of a psychological history.

It is always possible that certain screen motifs are relevant only to part of the nation, but caution in this respect should not prejudice one against the existence of tendencies affecting the nation as a whole. They are the less questionable as common traditions and permanent interrelationship between the different strata of the population exert a unifying influence in the depths of collective life. In pre-Nazi Germany, middle-class penchants penetrated all strata; they competed with the political aspirations of the Left and also filled the voids of the upper-class mind. This accounts for the nation-wide appeal of the German cinema—a cinema firmly rooted in middle-class mentality. From 1930 to 1933, the actor Hans Albers played

<sup>17</sup> Deming, "The Library of Congress Film Project: Exposition of a Method," *Library of Congress Quarterly*, 1944, p. 20.

the heroes of films in which typically bourgeois daydreams found outright fulfillment; his exploits gladdened the hearts of worker audiences, and in *MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM* we see his photograph worshiped by the daughters of aristocratic families.

Scientific convention has it that in the chain of motivations natural characteristics are effects rather than causes—effects of natural surroundings, historic experiences, economic and social conditions. And since we are all human beings, similar external factors can be expected to provoke analogous psychological reactions everywhere. The paralysis of minds spreading throughout Germany between 1924 and 1929 was not at all specifically German. It would be easy to show that under the influence of analogous circumstances a similar collective paralysis occurs—and has occurred—in other countries as well.<sup>18</sup> However, the dependence of a people's mental attitudes upon external factors does not justify the frequent disregard of these attitudes. Effects may at any time turn into spontaneous causes. Notwithstanding their derivative character, psychological tendencies often assume independent life, and, instead of automatically changing with ever-changing circumstances, become themselves essential springs of historical evolution. In the course of its history every nation develops dispositions which survive their primary causes and undergo a metamorphosis of their own. They cannot simply be inferred from current external factors, but, conversely, help determine reactions to such factors. We are all human beings, if sometimes in different ways. These collective dispositions gain momentum in cases of extreme political change. The dissolution of political systems results in the decomposition of psychological systems, and in the ensuing turmoil traditional inner attitudes, now released, are bound to become conspicuous, whether they are challenged or endorsed.

#### V

That most historians neglect the psychological factor is demonstrated by striking gaps in our knowledge of German history from World War I to Hitler's ultimate triumph—the period covered in this book. And yet the dimensions of event, milieu and ideology have

<sup>18</sup> Of course, such similarities never amount to more than surface resemblances. External circumstances are nowhere strictly identical, and whatever psychological tendency they entail comes true within a texture of other tendencies which color its meaning.

been thoroughly investigated. It is well known that the German "Revolution" of November 1918 failed to revolutionize Germany; that the then omnipotent Social Democratic Party proved omnipotent only in breaking the backbone of the revolutionary forces, but was incapable of liquidating the army, the bureaucracy, the big-estate owners and the moneyed classes; that these traditional powers actually continued to govern the Weimar Republic which came into shadowy being after 1919. It is also known how hard the young Republic was pressed by the political consequences of the defeat and the strategems of the leading German industrialists and financiers who unrestrainedly upheld inflation, impoverishing the old middle class. Finally, one knows that after the five years of the Dawes Plan—that blessed era of foreign loans so advantageous to big business—the economic world crisis dissolved the mirage of stabilization, destroyed what was still left of middle-class background and democracy, and completed the general despair by adding mass unemployment. It was in the ruins of "the system" which had never been a true structure that the Nazi spirit flourished.<sup>19</sup>

But these economic, social and political factors do not suffice to explain the tremendous impact of Hitlerism and the chronic inertia in the opposite camp. Significantly, many observant Germans refused until the last moment to take Hitler seriously, and even after his rise to power considered the new regime a transitory adventure. Such opinions at least indicate that there was something unaccountable in the domestic situation, something not to be inferred from circumstances within the normal field of vision.

Only a few analyses of the Weimar Republic hint at the psychological mechanisms behind the inherent weakness of the Social Democrats, the inadequate conduct of the communists and the strange reactions of the German masses.<sup>20</sup> Franz Neumann is forced to explain the failure of the communists partly in terms of "their inability to evaluate correctly the psychological factors and sociological trends operating among German workers. . . ." Then he adds to a statement on the Reichstag's limited political power the revealing remark: "Democracy might have survived none the less—but only if the democratic value system had been firmly rooted in the soci-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Rosenberg, *Geschichte der Deutschen Republik*; Schwarzschild, *World in Trance*, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Outstanding among these analyses is Horkheimer, ed., *Studien über Astorität und Familie*; see especially Horkheimer, "Theoretische Entwürfe über Autorität und Familie," pp. 3-76.

ety. . . ." <sup>21</sup> Erich Fromm amplifies this by contending that the German workers' psychological tendencies neutralized their political tenets, thus precipitating the collapse of the socialist parties and the trade-unions.<sup>22</sup>

The behavior of broad middle-class strata also seemed to be determined by overwhelming compulsions. In a study published in 1930 I pointed out the pronounced "white-collar" pretensions of the bulk of German employees, whose economic and social status in reality bordered on that of the workers, or was even inferior to it.<sup>23</sup> Although these lower middle-class people could no longer hope for bourgeois security, they scorned all doctrines and ideals more in harmony with their plight, maintaining attitudes that had lost any basis in reality. The consequence was mental forlornness: they persisted in a kind of vacuum which added further to their psychological obduracy. The conduct of the petty bourgeoisie proper was particularly striking. Small shopkeepers, tradesmen and artisans were so full of resentments that they shrank from adjusting themselves. Instead of realizing that it might be in their practical interest to side with democracy, they preferred, like the employees, to listen to Nazi promises. Their surrender to the Nazis was based on emotional fixations rather than on any facing of facts.

Thus, behind the overt history of economic shifts, social exigencies and political machinations runs a secret history involving the inner dispositions of the German people. The disclosure of these dispositions through the medium of the German screen may help in the understanding of Hitler's ascent and ascendancy.

<sup>21</sup> Neumann, *Behemoth*, pp. 18-19, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Kracauer, *Die Angewandten*.