

**THE WRITING ON THE SCREEN: IMAGES OF TEXT IN THE GERMAN CINEMA  
FROM 1920 TO 1949**

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2006

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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By establishing a crucial figural relation between image and text in the cinema, this dissertation offers a detailed analysis of the uses of writing through select canonical works of a significant period in the history of the German cinema. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory and Gilles Deleuze's conceptions of the cinematic image, as well as a Derridean definition of writing, I argue that instances of written text in images of the German cinema are social hieroglyphs rendered as allegorical gestures, which inscribe questions of authority in the form of grammatological constellations within the movement of images. These hieroglyphic configurations, spelled out as writing on the screen, stand in reference to specific modalities which affirm the presence of a larger organizational regime of truth. Instances of writing thus constitute the inscriptions through which such structures of power acquire legibility and, conversely, become visible. Ultimately, this figural regime delineates questions of the political constitution of the state because the struggle for authority and its legitimacy as an organizational system become embodied in allegorical forms of writing that inscribe the body politic into filmic texts as subject positions. This approach is predicated on a subjunctive dimension that redefines the intrinsic relation of the text to its "outside." Chapters discuss the figure of authority in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Kameradschaft*, circularity in Fritz Lang's *M* and his *Mabuse* films, titles and writing in early Weimar film censorship decisions, the star figure of Emil Jannings in the Nazi film *Ohm Krüger*, and the postwar films *Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns* and *Rotation*. An epilogue investigates the reconfigurations of writing on the screen in R.W. Fassbinder's *Die Dritte Generation* (1979) and the 1998 hacker film *23*. In all of these case studies, I contend that writing in film remains significant when the image as such must be augmented by gestures toward a figural language.

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## PREFACE

... im Erdensturz dem Umbruch einer Zeile  
noch zugewandt, bis an den jüngsten Tag  
erfüllend jene heilige Satzung, wo  
es auf das Komma ankommt, mag ich stammelnd  
dereinst nicht wissen, was das Thema war.  
— Karl Kraus, “Nach Zwanzig Jahren” (1919)

(... At earth’s decline still facing the page-  
proof of a line, until Doomsday  
complying with that sacred statute where  
a comma matters, I, stammering, may one day  
no longer know what the subject was.  
— “Twenty Years Later”)

I am grateful for the profound guidance from my committee members. Above all, I am indebted to Marcia Landy, my *Doktormutter*, for her vision, wisdom, and patience. I would also like to thank Lucy Fischer and Paul A. Bové for their graduate seminars, where this project was first articulated, and for their productive comments, elegant critiques, and rigorous readings throughout. I appreciate the assistance offered by Sabine Hake in the early stages of the project’s development. And for Linda Schulte-Sasse, whose participation, interest, and kind encouragement came at a crucial time for my work, I am especially thankful. Over the years, at

the University of Bonn and the University of Pittsburgh, I have been fortunate to be surrounded by many great thinkers. A few, however, have consistently managed to convince me that our intellectual labor, so often lonely and vain, is not only worth pursuing but can indeed be a magnificent endeavor. For their far-reaching inspiration and intangible support, I thank the late Stefan Germer, Frank Kearful, Dana Polan, Jonathan Arac, and especially Vladimir Padunov and Nancy Condee.

While studying at Pitt, I have benefited from the friendship and counsel of many of my fellow graduate students. Barry Howell, Seth Graham, and Aparna Nayak will always be my intellectual companions.

For their kind and collegial assistance, I thank Ute Maschke, Ithaca, Andreas Pütz, Frankfurt, Liza Shineko, New York, Amy Villarejo, Ithaca, and Simon Ward, Edinburgh. Support for the research, development, and completion of the dissertation was provided in part by the generous assistance of the Graduate Program for Cultural Studies, The Office of the Provost, and the Andrew Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at the University of Pittsburgh.

This work is dedicated, with immense gratitude, to Susan and our daughter Angela.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: WRITING, TEXT, AND FIGURATION IN THE CINEMA

The following is borne out of the desire to reconcile the conflict between two critical aspects that stand in seemingly diametrical distance to each other, the self-evident conceptual significance of the history of German cinema on the one hand and the marginal relevance of the single filmic element of writing among so many categories on the other, and thereby to delineate an area of critical interest in which these two aspects do not invalidate or oppose each other but instead continue to oscillate in a state of productive tension. More than any other medium, save perhaps for printed matter itself, the German cinema has justifiably been taken to task and summoned for historical evidence given its central prominence for the conjunction of film and politics, where the imaginary on the screen finds its actual corollary on the streets, so to speak, and this vise-like yoking in which “the German nation is haunted by its cinema screen, and the films are haunted by German history,”<sup>1</sup> as Thomas Elsaesser puts it, has structured the critical horizon of a scholarship haunted by these dual specters.

The awareness of this haunting presence is a familiar assertion by now, so that it has become customary for critical endeavors to announce from the outset a necessary paradigmatic departure from the umbrage cast by these specters. In turn, this horizon is defined by two figures

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-4.



that determine the ideological fiction which, in a variation of Elsaesser's terms, constitutes the "two halves of a whole that to this day spells Germany's national cinema."<sup>2</sup> These figures are Siegfried Kracauer with his *From Caligari to Hitler* from 1947 and Lotte Eisner with her 1952 work *The Haunted Screen*, works that so profoundly influenced the understanding of German cinema that they seem to define it to this day.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, as a gesture of contraposing their works from these two figures, Tim Bergfelder notes a shift from the "methodological stranglehold... that has begun to unhook German film historiography from its anchorage in a political master narrative of nation,"<sup>4</sup> Sabine Hake vows to "move beyond symptomatic readings of a few canonical films and famous directors,"<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Elsaesser diagnoses a "historical imaginary" that is defined by a "quasi-existential bond between a group of films and the subsequent fate of the society that produced and consumed them,"<sup>6</sup> only to pose the rhetorical question, "how far do we need this imaginary today?"<sup>7</sup>

Accompanying these departures are the declarations in which different areas of inquiry are outlined and proposed, such as Elsaesser's statement that at this point, for the "idea" of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), and Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (1952; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), originally published in French as *L'écran démoniaque*.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Bergfelder, introduction to *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

German cinema, his decision is that “we can afford to pay a little less attention to the best-known periods: the 1920s and the 1970s.”<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Bergfelder’s declaration that “selected moments in German film history, most notably Weimar, Nazi, and the New German Cinema of the 1970s, have received an enormous amount of scholarly attention”<sup>9</sup> to the detriment of other fields of inquiry, which has regrettably amplified a “commonly held perception that German cinema can be defined and understood almost exclusively through an isolated engagement with these three historical periods.”<sup>10</sup> While it may certainly be true that these periods represent a well-trodden academic terrain, it does not necessarily follow that it has been exhausted nor that it warrants abandonment. In other words, to focus now on canonical films from the periods of Weimar, Nazi, or the New German Cinema as a theoretical cluster, then, indicates either a belated return in which it becomes possible to survey the material unimpeded by a sense of urgency and immediacy after scholarship has “moved on,” to invoke a current phrase, or it indicates the possibility to reconfigure in different terms the questions and concerns that drew scholars to the area in the first place.

To begin with Kracauer, therefore, once again, means to conjure up the melancholy figure of the film historian who, in Elsaesser’s characterization, “has to turn detective, alert to every index or clue,”<sup>11</sup> and then despairs “at having discovered so many hitherto unsuspected skeletons in Weimar cinema’s cupboard.”<sup>12</sup> If Kracauer’s project was to survey the “visible

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “The German Cinema as Image and Idea,” in *The BFI Companion to German Cinema*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Bergfelder, *The German Cinema Book*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

hieroglyphs”<sup>13</sup> recorded by the cinema in order to collect the “clues to hidden mental processes,”<sup>14</sup> then a replication of this work will, at best, add to the already-known in the imaginary of the history of German cinema and thus merely provide “mutually confirming metaphors between the film-text and the context”<sup>15</sup> that have “long settled into historical clichés.”<sup>16</sup> Inasmuch as Kracauer has been the frequent point of departure, his formulation of the “hidden mental processes” that provide the insight into “the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge”<sup>17</sup> has been the main focus for charges and the basis of critique, even when, as in Anton Kaes’ *From Hitler to Heimat*, his work provides the impetus for a variation on its title.<sup>18</sup> But what is rarely noted is that in his methodological introduction Kracauer pays specific

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<sup>13</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Anton Kaes, *From Hitler To Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Kaes notes that Kracauer’s “trajectory... is a bold and problematic construct.” Cf. p. xi. In anticipation of both his title and the argument Kaes outlines for his discussion of Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler, A Film From Germany*, Gilles Deleuze acknowledges the importance of Kracauer’s suggestion of the concept of automata and states that “what is interesting in Krackauer’s [*sic*] book *From Caligari to Hitler* is that it shows how expressionist cinema reflected the rise of the Hitlerian automaton.” Thus, Deleuze continues, it is “as if Syberberg felt the need to add a second volume to Krackauer’s [*sic*] book, but this second volume would be a film: ... from Hitler to a *Film from Germany*.” Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 264. The English translation replicates the unfortunate typographical error in the French original. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’Image-Temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 344.

attention to what he terms a film's "innate mission to ferret out minutiae."<sup>19</sup> Borrowing the term "visible hieroglyphs" from the German-born Jewish-American philosopher Horace Meyer Kallen, Kracauer quotes from Kallen's 1942 work *Art and Freedom* in which Kallen notes the "unseen dynamics of human relations"<sup>20</sup> as they are revealed in the "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."<sup>21</sup>

What Kracauer emphasizes here through a recourse to Kallen is a description of gesture, which, as Giorgio Agamben demonstrates, serves as the categorical quality of the cinema, since the cinema is the place where "a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."<sup>22</sup> For Kracauer, writing in 1946 about Weimar cinema and the rise of fascism from his exile in New York under the stated purpose to "effectively implement the cultural aims of the United Nations,"<sup>23</sup> Agamben's definition becomes even more evocative and important. As Agamben states, gesture turns significant for "human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness"<sup>24</sup> and "the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable."<sup>25</sup> As a description of Kracauer's situation,

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<sup>19</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. v.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Agamben's definition proves to be especially succinct, since he links this sense of loss to the accompanying impulse in which the bourgeoisie "succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology."<sup>26</sup>

This focus on the "minutiae," the small gestures recorded on celluloid, indicate how much Kracauer's work was defined by a conceptual sense of scale that moved from the small details or "clues" to the large-scale thematics or psychology of the social text and its audiences. In doing so, the minute and marginal elements illuminate the larger aspects, so that Kracauer works on the basis of a mode of inversion in which scale is redefined in order to locate a conceptual and political dimension in filmic fragments and traces. That is, large-scale national and historical phenomena are encapsulated by the unobtrusive and small surface phenomena of the cinema as gestures, and in Kracauer's case these correspond to the clues that can be settled as the inner psychic dimensions of the individual in relation to the nation. The sustained spell that both Kracauer in particular and Weimar Expressionism as a filmic mode in general have exerted for film scholarship is to understand film as the outwardly or externalized material manifestations of inner states of being and vice versa. Hence this mode of inquiry is premised on a radical break with "natural" perception. The fractured mind searches for hidden clues in the minutiae and detritus as a way of explaining the major forces in the interconnected but hidden networks of power. Given the large-scale atrocities of fascist power and the unfathomable question of how "all of this" could have happened, this mode of analysis indicates a means of response towards films as historical documents that could provide answers.

Walter Benjamin has responded to this question by insisting that the "current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

philosophical.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, he continues, this “amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”<sup>28</sup> Like Kracauer, Benjamin is concerned with the conditions that make fascism possible but he locates the response in a different conception of history that does not assume a teleology of progress in which fascism is treated as a “historical norm.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, through his emphasis on minutiae Kracauer exhibits a close affinity to Benjamin’s understanding of the philosophical treatise as a mode of thinking through sustained endurance, which Benjamin describes with the image of the fragmented mosaic. The “proper mode of contemplation,” Benjamin writes, is characterized by a return in which “[t]irelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.”<sup>30</sup> For Benjamin, the continual return to the “fragments of thought” provides the insight that the “relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter.”<sup>31</sup>

Kracauer’s focus on the gesture can therefore be understood in Benjamin’s terms as an enduring dedication to an immersion in the minute details, but also through Agamben’s terms as a concern with the cinematic image not in its “mythical rigidity,”<sup>32</sup> but rather in its real aspect

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 257. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London: Verso, 1996), p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, p. 55.

since “the element of cinema is gesture and not image.”<sup>33</sup> Agamben follows Gilles Deleuze here, who, in Agamben’s formulation, has demonstrated that “the cinema erases the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality”<sup>34</sup> and instead thinks of them as one. Moreover, the importance of gesture for Agamben lies in the fact that it removes another distinction, namely the one which posits the “false alternative between ends and means”<sup>35</sup> in a transcendent state of separation. Rather, gesture becomes a theatrical expression of pure mediality as such. As Agamben states, “gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, because of this mediality of means, gesture also expresses the inexpressible, so that it becomes “essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a *gag* in the proper meaning of the term.”<sup>37</sup>

With this formulation Agamben returns to a realm away from the discrete transcendence of categories and moves closer to a Baroque sensibility that does not maintain this distinction. Deleuze describes the Baroque as the movements through fragments that fold into each other, so that the separation between distinct categories is suspended as movement. Thus, he says, the “visible and the legible, the outside and the inside, the façade and the chamber are ... *not* two

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Agamben refers to Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis in original.) Agamben uses “gag” here in both senses as an object in a mouth that prevents speech, but also a “gag” on stage as an actor’s improvisational gesture to compensate for the inability to remember lines.

worlds since the visible can be read ... and the legible has its theater.”<sup>38</sup> In these relational folds, according to Deleuze, lies a “perspectivism as a truth of relativity,”<sup>39</sup> which constitutes a variant of relativism. However, this Baroque relativism is one that is not “a variation of truth according to the subject, but the *condition* in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in the Baroque Deleuze registers a theatrical mode of understanding that “entails neither falling into nor emerging from illusion but rather realizing something in illusion itself, or of tying it to a spiritual presence that endows its spaces and fragments with a collective unity.”<sup>41</sup> This mode of expression has its analogy in Agamben’s concept of gesture, which is at once an end, as “communication,” and at the same time its means, the “communicability,” which cannot be separated from each other.

At the same time, this illusory “spiritual presence” in fragments can be defined along another trajectory of investigating such figurations. As a theory of the Baroque mode of expression, Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* remains the most sustained inquiry into a particular form of figuration which he defines as allegory. In his investigation into the qualities of the image, Agamben notes that the image is defined by a tension between, on the one hand, the “reification and obliteration of a gesture,”<sup>42</sup> in which case the image appears isolated as an “*imago*... or as symbol.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand stand gestures that preserve

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<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 31. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, p. 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



movement, which Agamben associates with the “image flashing in the epiphany of involuntary memory.”<sup>44</sup> In this quality, the image “always refers beyond itself to a whole of which it is a part.”<sup>45</sup> Here Agamben invokes Benjamin with the epiphany of involuntary memory, which Benjamin would call the experience of “shock.”<sup>46</sup> More importantly, however, Agamben’s use of the term gesture as pointing to a larger entity of which it is itself an inseparable part suggests a profoundly allegorical quality along Benjaminian lines. Benjamin refers to this figure as a “schema,” which “determines the character of allegory as a form of writing.”<sup>47</sup> “As a schema,” Benjamin continues, allegory is “at one and the same time a fixed image and a fixing sign.”<sup>48</sup>

Benjamin insists on a radical departure from allegory understood as an inferior form of signification or a particular and stilted variant of the symbolic. Instead, allegory is, as he says, not “a mere mode of designation, ...but a form of expression... just as writing is.”<sup>49</sup> What he has achieved with this approach is to demonstrate, in Deleuze’s summary, that allegory is “a power of figuration entirely different from that of the symbol: the latter combines the eternal and the momentary, nearly at the center of the world.”<sup>50</sup> In opposition to this, Deleuze continues, Benjamin’s understanding of allegory “produces a history from nature and transforms history

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, pp. 160 – 161.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 184.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. In the original: “Ein Schema ist sie, als dieses Schema Gegenstand des Wissens, ihm [dem Allegoriker] unverlierbar erst als ein fixiertes: fixiertes Bild und fixierendes Zeichen in einem.” Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), p. 161.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, p. 125.

into nature in a world that no longer has its center.”<sup>51</sup> Even in its classical manifestations, as described by Angus Fletcher, “in the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another,”<sup>52</sup> and thus “destroys the normal expectation we have about language, that our words ‘mean what they say.’”<sup>53</sup> These brief sketches around the term allegory suggest its proximity to a mode of figuration in which the visible and the legible, or the means and the ends, are no longer distinct categories but instead point to an altogether different conception of how these terms should be seen as emblematic for dimensions of meaning that are staged as gestures of endurance or as hieroglyphics in which the visual and the legible merge.

The reason this is relevant is because, understood in this line of argument, allegory defines a way to begin to conceptualize the vast area of the figure of writing in the cinema. For a number of reasons, it seems, writing in film is taken for granted, to the point that it does not merit observation. Part of this is due to its self-evidence, or what we could call the “quiddity” of the image of writing in the sense that writing “is what it is” in the image or that writing merely indicates the “sign of a sign.” But once we pay attention to the phenomenon within the ecology and economy in the field of vision, the use of writing in the cinema becomes less self-evident or “natural.” In its self-evidence, then, writing constitutes a double inflection in the same way that gesture communicates communicability. Jacques Derrida speaks of such self-evidence as a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 2. Here Fletcher also points out the term’s Greek etymology: “allegory” derives “from *allos* + *agoreuein* (*other* + *speak in the assembly or market*). *Agoreuein* connotes public, open, declarative speech. This sense is inverted by *allos*. Thus allegory is often called ‘inversion.’” Therefore, Fletcher continues, “the political overtones of the verb *agoreuein* need always to be emphasized, insofar as censorship may produce devious, ironical ways of speaking.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

paradigmatic example for the “blindness to the text,”<sup>54</sup> which replicates what he calls elsewhere the “privileged unity of sound and sense,”<sup>55</sup> within which “writing would always be derivative, accidental, exterior, doubling the signifier.”<sup>56</sup> In this respect, writing within the image seems to acquire the same status, since the relation between the filmic image and the writing within it seems to replicate the division of privilege that Derrida defines as the “metaphysics of presence”<sup>57</sup> of speech and logos in opposition to “writing” as a notational system that designates “not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also, ... beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself.”<sup>58</sup>

When Derrida’s work was taken seriously in film studies, its initial importance lay in a reconceptualization of its concerns, in particular, for the organizing structure of film history and genre studies, which as Peter Brunette and David Wills call it, are both grounded in an “appeal to a concept of dominance [that] seems... to rely, once again, on the finding of an essence that imposes order on recalcitrant particulars.”<sup>59</sup> But Brunette and Wills are equally wary of the idea of figuration in film studies, since for them it signals a “return to a phenomenological, quasi-

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 251.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 44.

religious perspective”<sup>60</sup> in an idealism of immediacy that ignores the “materiality and mediacy of the signifier”<sup>61</sup> and thus by “necessity obliterates the complexities always attending representation.”<sup>62</sup> In their project, the work of criticism requires a framework that can locate that which escapes signification and pays attention to the “gaps of a text... as aporias representing important points of articulation between its inside and outside.”<sup>63</sup> The difficulty in this work that Brunette and Wills make evident here lies both in the incipient didacticism that is inherent in any formulation of methodology and in the apparent impossibility to escape within this methodology certain categories, so that even a concept such as aporia stands in as a function of representation rather than something which elides this function.

However, their interstitial definition of the filmic text points to the potential of figuration again in a reconceived understanding of the relation between the “inside” and the “outside” of a text. Brunette and Wills propose to move from analogy as an idealist “figure of visual resemblance” to the concept of “anagram as a figure for a cinema to be read as writing.”<sup>64</sup> The most extensive work of anagrammatical film criticism that emphasized the significance of writing in film to date has been Tom Conley’s work, who, in his *Film Hieroglyphs*, has followed this trajectory of writing in film to the point where “writing and film become hieroglyphic,”<sup>65</sup> so that the film work takes on a rebus-like form which destabilizes its coherence and “yields an

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>65</sup> Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. x.

infinity of reflections”<sup>66</sup> that ultimately define an “active process of viewing that knows neither time nor history.”<sup>67</sup> It would be unfortunate if this approach remained the definitive investigation into the category of writing in film because Conley’s theoretical outline of the ramifications of the hieroglyphic dimension of writing in film limits itself to the declension of his insight through various permutations that, in analogy to his formulation of the “law of the letter,” end up “forcing its signs to circulate by and through each other and to promote a reading that knows no control other than the maddening closure of its redundancy.”<sup>68</sup>

Because of this tendency to celebrate the seemingly liberating potential of filmic writing as hieroglyphics from the burdens of history, such attempts at taking seriously the modalities and implications of signification are often dismissed in terms that suggest a theoretical form of hedonism implicit in frequent references to such catchphrases as the “pleasures of the text” or to *jouissance*. Moreover, as Paul Bové has demonstrated, the ways in which deconstruction has “come under attack for its failures to understand ‘history,’ to produce real historical knowledge,”<sup>69</sup> have made it possible to uphold the “neopragmatist efforts to negate and displace theory with ‘practice,’”<sup>70</sup> in order to provide aid and comfort through this “false hierarchical binary.”<sup>71</sup> These are but two reasons why this has unfortunately also resulted in the representation of the work of deconstruction as a caricature of licentious scholarship, which over

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. xxviii.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. xxxi.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>69</sup> Paul A. Bové, *In the Wake of Theory*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 6-7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the years has been more or less grotesquely pursued by its academic opponents but which by now has been successfully entrenched in its representation to the general public. The recent obituary of Jacques Derrida in the *New York Times* is an appalling example of this. The obituary, entitled “Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies in Paris at 74,”<sup>72</sup> was penned by Jonathan Kandell, a reporter and author of the 1985 Avon book *Passage Through El Dorado*, who in 1990 became embroiled in a minor journalism scuffle around allegations of plagiarism when he was dismissed by *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>73</sup> In the obituary, in stark contrast to the modicum of decorum that this genre ostensibly necessitates, Derrida was bizarrely caricatured as a vainglorious charlatan, whose work and legacy were variously summarized as “murky,” “turgid and baffling,” and as “undermining many of the traditional standards of classical education”

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<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Kandell, “Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies in Paris at 74,” *New York Times*, Sunday, 10 October 2004, sec. 1A, p. 1(F).

<sup>73</sup> Kandell had written a story profiling innovative managers in Soviet and Eastern-European economies during the *perestroika* period for *The Wall Street Journal* that was published on March 30, 1990. The article seemed to draw extensively on the book *Communist Entrepreneurs: Unknown Innovators in the Global Economy* by one John W. Kiser, III, without any references or acknowledgments. While he confirmed that he was familiar with the book, Kandell claimed he had perused it only once and had not consulted it again for the article. He refused to publish an annotated correction to include a reference to the book and was subsequently fired from the *Wall Street Journal*. In turn, Kandell sued the paper alleging that his journalistic reputation had been tarnished by his dismissal. A brief overview of the incident is provided by Daniel Lazare, “A Case of Plagiarism at the *Wall Street Journal*?” *Columbia Journalism Review* (January – February, 1991): pp. 6-7, which concludes with the observation that journalistic work often results in articles which inevitably repeat “many of the same anecdotes and much of the same information” as others. Lazare also offers a number of statements by a parade of Kandell’s former colleagues who vouch for his “judgment” and proclaim him “wholly honorable.”

while being “associated with divisive political causes.”<sup>74</sup> The piece culminated with the observation that Derrida had “confessed” to harboring the desire of becoming a professional soccer player as a young man.<sup>75</sup>

There is, then, a need to curb both the conceptual license to instrumentalize deconstruction as a means to liberate criticism that, in Conley’s terms, “knows neither time nor history,” and a serious need to revisit the insights of Derrida, if only to counter the way in which his work of deconstruction has been besmirched. As a means to do so, the possibility of reintegrating the work of Walter Benjamin with Derrida’s reflections on writing offers a promising trajectory. The conceptual proximity and intellectual connection between Benjamin and Derrida has occasionally been established, so, for example, by Eric Santner, who notes that “in a language anticipating Derrida’s critique of Western phonocentrism, Benjamin suggests that the greatness of the baroque lay precisely in its insight into the irreducible elegiac dimension of signification.”<sup>76</sup> Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* also indicates that the anagrammatic approach of Conley must be reconceptualized in its proper historical dimension. Benjamin, in anticipation of

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<sup>74</sup> Kandell, “Jacques Derrida,” p. 49A.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Kandell left out through which interrogation techniques this information was obtained. After the publication of this vindictive and arrogant missive, an open letter in response to the newspaper by Samuel Weber and Kenneth Reinhard was posted online by the University of California, Irvine. To date more than 5,100 signatures have been attached to the letter, which can found at “Remembering Jacques Derrida” at [http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering\\_jd/index.php](http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering_jd/index.php). In a minor variation of the obituary’s tone, but one which would have undoubtedly delighted Derrida, a search within the *New York Times* commercial archive program “Times Select” automatically assists users who enter the search query “Jacques Derrida” with the helpful response “Did You Intend to Search for Jacques Deride?”

<sup>76</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 11.

Conley's approach, notes that "in the anagrams... and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes."<sup>77</sup>

For Benjamin, however, the mode of allegory is crucial for its "strange combination of nature and history."<sup>78</sup> Prefiguring Agamben's discussion of the dynamic antinomies within the image as both a "reification and obliteration of a gesture,"<sup>79</sup> and therefore, as he states, "the *imago* as death mask or as symbol,"<sup>80</sup> Benjamin establishes the historical dimension of allegory. As he puts it, in the symbol "the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption,"<sup>81</sup> which corresponds to Agamben's notion of the "obliteration" of the gesture. In contrast to this, and corresponding to what Agamben calls the "reification of gesture... as death mask,"<sup>82</sup> Benjamin argues, stands the allegorical way of seeing through which "the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified, primordial landscape."<sup>83</sup> Benjamin continues this insight and states that in allegory history "enters" as writing, or, as it has

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 207.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>79</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

<sup>82</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, p. 55.

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166. The "Hippocratic Face" (Latin *facies Hippocratica*) denotes a cachectic or morbid appearance of the face. It is "applied to the shrunken and livid aspect of the countenance immediately before death, or in a case of exhaustion threatening death: so called because described by Hippocrates." Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Hippocratic."



been translated, “when... history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, Benjamin declares, “the word ‘history’ stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience.”<sup>85</sup>

The conceptual return to Benjamin and Kracauer for a historical thinking by way of allegory in film studies has recently been developed by D.N. Rodowick in his study of what he terms *the figural*, which he initially defines as a “semiotic regime where the ontological distinction between linguistic and plastic representations breaks down”<sup>86</sup> and thus enlists it as a way of “deconstructing the opposition of word and image and for creating new concepts for comprehending the figural as a transformation of discourse by recent technologies of the visible.”<sup>87</sup> In the course of outlining a comprehensive theory of the figural, Rodowick also returns to Kracauer and Benjamin for their rejection of traditional philosophy as an “obstacle to understanding the social knowledge embedded in mass cultural phenomena and the space-time of everyday life.”<sup>88</sup> That is, as Rodowick argues, for both Benjamin and Kracauer “neither traditional art... nor idealist philosophy... can comprehend the social hieroglyph because nature has been transformed by capital, and the isolated interiority of the aesthetic subject has

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<sup>84</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177. In the original: “Wenn mit dem Trauerspiel die Geschichte in den Schauplatz hineinwandert, so tut sie es als Schrift.” Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, p. 155.

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177. In the original: “Auf dem Antlitz der Natur steht ‘Geschichte’ in der Zeichenschrift der Vergängnis.” Cf. Benjamin, *Ursprung*, p. 155.

<sup>86</sup> D.N. Rodowick, *Reading The Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

disappeared into the mass.”<sup>89</sup> While Rodowick shares the critical impatience with Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler*, for which, in Rodowick’s words, Kracauer’s later work served as a “historiographic correction,”<sup>90</sup> he determines that one of the crucial aspects of Kracauer’s thinking “concerns the special epistemological status of mass cultural phenomena, a status that demands that they be cataloged and brought to the attention of an informed reading that can unlock their knowledge.”<sup>91</sup>

Thus the affinity of Kracauer with Benjamin, for Rodowick, centers around Kracauer’s idea of the “representational characteristics of both photography and history as modes of *alienation*, as cognitive apparatuses that are able to name and thus to call virtually into existence phenomena that might otherwise be lost to thought.”<sup>92</sup> This occurs precisely because “social life is understood here as having an indeterminate, multiple, and fragmentary character that overwhelms individual perception and reduces it to unconscious thought.”<sup>93</sup> The task of the cultural historian, then, is defined by these ephemeral figures and characters which need to be comprehended as “the archive of historiographic concepts that hold those figures available to articulate the object of history by establishing the conditions of its intelligibility.”<sup>94</sup> This is where Rodowick establishes the link to Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and to a section of his “Epistemo – Critical Prologue” in particular. In this “prologue,” a rigorous introduction to his study of allegory that at times approaches esoteric dimensions, Benjamin

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 149. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

develops the notion of the constellation as an analogy when he states categorically that “ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”<sup>95</sup> To derive at this point, Benjamin faults the scientific method in which a systematic approach demands coherent completeness but which ultimate succeeds only in the “attempts to ascertain the truth in mere cognitions and cognitional patterns.”<sup>96</sup> Moreover, this attempt is characterized by the “ambition to grasp the truth... in an encyclopaedic accumulation of items of knowledge.”<sup>97</sup> Against this ambition, which in the original Benjamin calls *Anmaßung* or “arrogance,”<sup>98</sup> he posits a notion of “discontinuity” in which phenomena “are divested of their false unity.”<sup>99</sup> Only through this divestment is it possible to arrive at ideas because ideas “are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.”<sup>100</sup>

While Rodowick does not explicitly make use of Benjamin’s definition of the configuration here as the arrangement of disparate and fragmentary elements, he traces a dialectic through the affinity of Benjamin’s work on allegory and Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* that arrives at a definition of the “historical idea.”<sup>101</sup> This idea follows neither the historicist demand

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<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, p. 15.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 33.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, p. 155.

that history be represented objectively as a demonstration of how “it has actually been,”<sup>102</sup> nor does it require the amassing of mere quantities of information as fact, save, perhaps, for the figure of the collector, who, as Rodowick cites Kracauer, “reveals a theological motif, ‘as if fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead.’”<sup>103</sup> Rather, the concept that Kracauer develops as the historical idea is the development of “a new terrain in which a wide variety of primary historical material distributes and organizes itself, illuminating previously unthought patterns of intelligibility.”<sup>104</sup> Beyond this, Rodowick states, Kracauer’s historical idea acquires its ultimate significance “because it fuses the particular and the general in a way unavailable to philosophical knowing.”<sup>105</sup>

These iterations through a wide-ranging area of critical thought may suggest some of the theoretical foundations with which the phenomenon of writing in film can be approached here. Tracing a conceptual line of argument through the work of Agamben, Kracauer, and Benjamin, the relevance of Rodowick’s category of the figural for an understanding of writing in film determines that it is not mere anagrammatical play. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier has done much to shift the analysis of writing in film from anagrammatical play to a sustained definition of *cinécriture*. Rodowick notes that Ropars-Wuilleumier develops her theory of filmic

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<sup>102</sup> The famous dictum from Leopold von Ranke’s 1824 *History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples 1494 to 1514*, which, with feigned modesty, declared the task of the historian to “merely say how it has actually been.” (“Er will bloß sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.”)

<sup>103</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, p. 154. Rodowick does not mention Benjamin’s self-avowed collecting mania in this context, nor does he note that Kracauer was only one of two critics who reviewed Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* extensively at the time of its publication.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

hieroglyphics from a triangulation established by the “common interest of Freud, Derrida, and Sergei Eisenstein in pictographic scripts (the rebus, the hieroglyph, the Japanese ideogram) as the model for figural activity that confounds the phonocentric model of signification.”<sup>106</sup> With this focus, Rodowick argues, Ropars-Wuilleumier succeeds in developing a grammatology that overcomes “the difficulties that film has posed for both linguistics and literary semiotics.”<sup>107</sup> As Rodowick puts it, Ropars-Wuilleumier aims in “her textual criticism, then, to focus on those films in which one can detect ‘privileged fracture zones,’”<sup>108</sup> in order to disrupt “the mutual transformation of the cinematic and narrative codes as a process in which the latter stabilize the former”<sup>109</sup> and to demonstrate, instead, that this transformation is a “potentially destabilizing one that fragments narrative through the possibilities intrinsic to cinema.”<sup>110</sup>

As Dana Polan outlines, Ropars-Wuilleumier’s contribution is her focus to concentrate on a “modernist conception of writing in which a dispersive force intrinsic to writing breaks up any ultimate coincidence of signifier and signified.”<sup>111</sup> In this respect, Ropars-Wuilleumier is celebrated by Polan as one who “has brilliantly realized the potentials of deconstruction.”<sup>112</sup> The problem, however, with this approach of deconstruction lies in its inherent potential for an aesthetic formalism, which, as Dana Polan argues, “paradoxically turns deconstruction into one

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>111</sup> Dana Polan, “‘Desire Shifts the Differance’: Figural Poetics and Figural Politics in the Film Theory of Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier,” *Camera Obscura* 12 (summer 1984): 76.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

more idealism.”<sup>113</sup> Without an acknowledgment, Polan continues, of the fact that “we live in a world not just of difference but of differentiation, of the rigid enclosing of energy into hierarchies and territories,”<sup>114</sup> deconstruction ultimately becomes a substitute for another idealist esotericism. In Polan’s astute formulation, that is, if we fail to analyze how “this world positions its subjects in specific ways, ... we run the danger of turning all issues into endless replays of one abstract issue.”<sup>115</sup> This, then, is the point at which a return to Kracauer becomes possible again in his goals of finding significance in the “casual configurations”<sup>116</sup> that the screen reflects in order to delineate what he calls “something unaccountable..., something not to be inferred from circumstances within the normal field of vision.”<sup>117</sup>

The way in which writing in film will be looked at in the following is determined by these theoretical inflections. That is, this investigation retraces Kracauer’s social hieroglyphs in order to look at them as allegorical gestures which define “legibility” and inscription as a form of grammatological constellations within the movement of images. This approach, however, does not rest on a false binary between “textual analysis” and its “contextual” counterpart, but rather attempts to define the terrain of inquiry anew by taking seriously the insights of the figural and the allegorical that both fundamentally redefine the intrinsic relation of the text to its “outside.” Instead of establishing from the outset the fictitious and factual boundaries as posited by the filmic texts, this study moves towards a subjunctive dimension within which the hieroglyphic and the allegorical operate, or, to borrow Rodowick’s formulation, towards investigating the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>116</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

“heterogeneous space of their cohabitation”<sup>118</sup> in which these two categories interfere. In other words, while much of the material that forms the basis of this study is derived from the primary texts and its analyses, secondary material and contemporaneous documents are equally given attention inasmuch as they are addressed by the films themselves.

Neither does it posit a study of audiences through any definition of a spectator position as psychoanalytic or ideological because the insights that follow here do not necessarily become actualized by real audience members or remain merely latent as a particular positional spectatorship. Rather, this work is animated by an understanding of how films engage actual or potential audiences within a social field in the active attempts to define values. In their discursive strategies and mechanisms as well as the modes of figuration they offer, films afford insight into the traces of those lines of conflict around which both social and affective values are established in a mutual engagement within culture. However, these figurations of value are not immediately legible or transparent. As Marcia Landy demonstrates, “films do not provide a transparent or univalent sense of the culture and social life.”<sup>119</sup> Instead, they take on the character of social hieroglyphs. Therefore, she continues, “in the creation of value, the problem that confronts the critic... is to understand the social character of these hieroglyphs,”<sup>120</sup> so that we can “comprehend the affect that is entailed in producing not merely monetary but social value as a means of producing the folklore of consensus.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930 – 1943* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) p. 6.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

In this respect, I aim to reintegrate the findings of deconstruction with historical research so that a position of scholarship can be redefined which looks again at how these films yield insight into the ways in which their hieroglyphics manifest themselves through subject positions in order to define social value. As will be demonstrated, writing in the German cinema functions as a pervasive mode through which questions of authority are articulated. The hieroglyphic configurations that are spelled out by the writing on the screen stand in reference to a higher power of veracity that affirms the presence of a larger organizational regime. Instances of writing, then, become the inscriptions through which these structures of power acquire legibility and, conversely, become visible as hieroglyphs. Ultimately, then, this figural regime determines the question of the political constitution of the state because the struggle for authority and its legitimacy as an organizational system becomes embodied in the baroque or allegorical forms of writing that inscribe the body politic into the films.

Accordingly, these figurations that I describe in detail and at length are in a Derridean sense present yet absent, but their marks are nonetheless evident through their allegorical manifestations. For this reason I also do not offer a sustained critique of ideology, even though the insights derived here have been defined by a history of ideas and an ideology of discipline that moves across various historical periods in a cross-section of German filmic images over the decades. This also implies the question of the “usefulness” of theory, which, to invoke a formulation of Gilles Deleuze, is always untimely, “especially today, because the times are not right.”<sup>122</sup> That the question which assumes a difference between a theory “about” the cinema and

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<sup>122</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 280.



“the concepts that cinema gives rise to”<sup>123</sup> is a fundamentally false distinction is one of the lasting achievements of Gilles Deleuze, but the question occasionally needs to be revisited, in particular when it involves a topic that is notoriously difficult to examine “theoretically,” as it were, since fascism in 20<sup>th</sup> century German history had such actual and devastating consequences which seem to transcend such facile distinctions. For these reasons, there has been a long and unfortunate resistance in German film studies to take seriously the insights of deconstruction. In order to avoid the ramifications of “theory,” German approaches to film studies can be frequently defined through lines of inquiry that fork either into a branch of quantification and sociographic enumeration, which Benjamin would have dismissed as “cognitional patterns,” or that return to a version of ideology critique, which provides the comfort of an identity through the illusion of a critical distance, which, in turn, turns the scholarship of German cinema into a clinical rather than a critical approach.

In their introduction to Friedrich Kittler’s *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*, the translators provide a specific historical account of the reasons for this resistance. As they state, “when poststructuralist theorizing crossed the Rhine from France in the late 1970s, it was not received with open arms.”<sup>124</sup> As they explain, this was due to the fact that the German Left, itself struggling for legitimacy and challenged by structuralist and poststructuralist criticisms of Marx,

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, “Translators’ Introduction: Friedrich Kittler and Media Discourse Analysis,” in *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*, by Friedrich A. Kittler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xvii. Ironically, Winthrop-Young and Wutz render this as a German issue of identity reaffirmation, a category which numerous approaches to deconstruction and post-structuralism have taken great pains to dismantle. The implications of this are worth investigating.

“was quick to resort to the ubiquitous *Irrationalismusvorwurf*,”<sup>125</sup> a charge that, “given National Socialism’s mobilization and exploitation of the strong antirational tradition on German thought... carried considerable weight in Germany.”<sup>126</sup> These challenges notwithstanding, the entrenched defensive position that German scholarship has frequently taken over the decades in combating the insights of poststructuralism may carry less weight at this point and may at long last have subsided to some degree by now.<sup>127</sup> Tim Bergfelder calls attention to the vibrant history of the study of German cinema and the general interest in the field that it has commanded, which has resulted in a “commitment to cross-cultural scholarly exchange that has been a characteristic feature of German film history in recent decades.”<sup>128</sup>

In these debates, however, Thomas Elsaesser notes the tendency of defining Weimar cinema and thus, by extension, the imaginary of the future of the German cinema to come after, through films that resist meaning and retain a rebus-like character of what he calls “picture puzzles.”<sup>129</sup> He accounts for this tendency as predicated by a “set of formal and stylistic devices, whose equivalences, inversions, and reversals facilitate but also necessitate the spectator construing ‘allegories of meaning’”<sup>130</sup> for these films. Because of this construction, he argues, Weimar cinema exerts a fascination on critics that, in a variation of his descriptive terms,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. *Irrationalismusvorwurf* means “charges of irrationalism.”

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> For an instantiation of such a productive dialogue that is not limited by a rhetoric of reconciliation, see Jacques Derrida/Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Der ununterbrochene Dialog*, ed. Martin Gessmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

<sup>128</sup> Bergfelder, *The German Cinema Book*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>129</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 4.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

continually turns into a “hypnotic hermeneutics.”<sup>131</sup> What I aim to demonstrate in the following chapters is that, while the focus on writing in these films often takes on the quality of delirious stupefaction, it does not follow that we have to lose our critical faculties in the face of performing the work of investigating the “hypnotic” or “hermeneutic” forces that writing in film imposes.<sup>132</sup>

In Elsaesser’s assessment, the work of the film historian remains that of the hermeneut, who finds the clues, which, in turn, yield a submerged meaning that serves to reconstruct the text in its fullness, absent another imaginary that would have defined these textual reconstructions in other terms. This hermeneutic work belongs to that of the historicist detective, reconstructing after the fact how it has been, after entropy has shattered everything into ruins and fragments, so that all of these are turned into potential clues in the waste land of facticity. Instead, I aim to define a different mode of detection by seeing the allegorical manifestations through the reconfiguration of figures. Tom Gunning proposes a different concept of detection as well, which, via Benjamin, locates “the dynamics of the detective story not in the scrutiny of clues but in the optical exchange between interior and exterior.”<sup>133</sup> According to Gunning, Benjamin develops this exchange as a way to understand the cinema “as not simply deceiving or creating illusion but as articulating the dialectic of interior/exterior, the relation between the private

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>132</sup> The other direction, of course, yields a delirious and hallucinatory hermeneutics because it organizes disparate, random, and haphazard elements into a larger pattern of meaning as an expression of apophenia, which sees patterns and meaning in random sets of data. There is another history of writing in film yet to be developed through this approach, but it might not find the critical sanction of Elsaesser either.

<sup>133</sup> Tom Gunning, “The Exterior as *Intérieur*: Benjamin’s Optical Detective,” *boundary 2* 30, no. 1 (spring 2003): p. 110.

dreaming self and the public space of production and history.”<sup>134</sup> Gunning uses the analogy of the detective story to outline a strand of thought in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* which posits the “uncanny experience of transformed vision, glimpsing a presence where it is not, a space where it does not belong, and triggering... ‘the flash of wakened [*sic*] consciousness.’”<sup>135</sup> The development of this dialectic suggests a necessity to pay attention to the transitions and inversions between the interior and the exterior, which writing in film as a figural construct indicates.

There is, however, another dimension to the preoccupation with the emblematics and text fragments of writing in film because, to invoke a common cliché, in doing so, the work seems to lose itself in the “details” and thus, ultimately, loses sight of the “big picture.” If the following will read more as detailed descriptions culminating in the meticulous reading of the uses of writing in the films that seem to be incidental and marginal and thus outside of the focus of criticism, then Benjamin’s use of the concept of the “anecdotal” may be of relevance here. In a discussion on the “street uprising of the anecdote” Benjamin’s asserts that it is the anecdote which “represents the strict antithesis to the sort of history which demands ‘empathy,’ which makes everything abstract.”<sup>136</sup> Benjamin continues by dismissing empathy as “this is what

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 127. Gunning’s reference within the citation is to the convolute entry “K1, 2” in a minor variation of Benjamin’s phrase, which is “the flash of awakened consciousness.” Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2002), p. 388.

<sup>136</sup> Walter Benjamin, “First Sketches (entry I<sup>o</sup>, 2)” in *The Arcades Project*, p. 846. From a very different perspective and welded to a structuralist notion, Joel Finemann also posits the anecdote as “a *historeme*, i.e., as the smallest minimal unit of historiographic fact.” Cf. Joel Finemann, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge 1989), p. 57. In the same volume, Gayatri Chakravorty

reading newspapers boils down to.”<sup>137</sup> For Benjamin, the cheapening sentiment of empathy renders everything as a gauzy abstraction, a projection mediated by a comforting sense of absence, and turns the work of the historian to an entry into a list of comparisons for large constructs or “large contexts.”<sup>138</sup> Thus historical work is degraded to the level of a newspaper reader who might nod his concerned head, bask in the comfort of compartmentalizing his identity, and continue to go about his business. By contrast, anecdotes encapsulate a form of “street insurgence.”<sup>139</sup> The anecdote “brings things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life.”<sup>140</sup> What really matters, therefore, Benjamin states, is that

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Spivak develops a much more productive understanding of marginality that does not reaffirm the centrality of the “center,” but rather demonstrates the crucial importance of the margins by going back to *marginalia* as the location of textual criticism since in “the early print culture in the West it was in the margins that the so-called argument of the paragraph or set of paragraph was written.” Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic,” in *The New Historicism*, p. 281. Along these lines, the work of noting instances of writing in film itself replicates the function of the scholar as a “scribe” or “rubricator,” in early modern productions of text as the one who takes dictation and copies the text, as it were, noticing moments of importance that are inscribed into the text like signatures or colophons. As a figure, here, *mise-en-abyme*, from its heraldic origins, also finds details within emblematic images that encapsulate and thereby replicate the larger history and genealogy of a name within the minute and the marginal.

<sup>137</sup> “‘Einfühlung’ darauf läuft Zeitungslesen hinaus.” Cf. *Walter Benjamin: Das Passagen-Werk*, vol. 5, bk. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), p. 1014 (emphasis in original). Eiland translates this passage as “‘empathy’: this is what newspaper reading terminates in,” a version which shifts emphasis away from Benjamin’s colloquial tone of disgust at the reductive effects of reading.

<sup>138</sup> Benjamin, “First Sketches (entry I<sup>o</sup>, 2),” p. 846.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

“The true method of making things present is: to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). Only anecdotes can do this for us. Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of ‘large contexts.’”<sup>141</sup>

In order to make this work possible, the archival work of the last decade and the primary research that has resulted in meticulous reconstructions of final film versions and the documentary material around the conditions of production that are now preserved in different media, accessible in formats such as DVDs, CD-ROMs, and websites, has been instrumental. In this sense, these documents confirm the value of archival work that makes it possible to analyze figures into which is inscribed a history that becomes “readable” only much later on. This also makes it necessary to return to the canonical film works of German cinema. According to Tom Cohen, the encounter with canonical works “often involves a systematic reversal of value-polarities and significations, a machine-like pre-inscription by which works already have entered the socialized or symbolic sphere of interpretation.”<sup>142</sup> Thus, Cohen argues, instead of maintaining an ossified preservation of value, “canonical works are often preserved and transmitted... because they have the power to radically disfigure the very values they are, once inscribed, used to uphold.”<sup>143</sup> The films that will be discussed in this study are in this sense canonical, but they have also already been defined as such by Kracauer, whose catalogue of films in *From Caligari to Hitler* constitutes a canon in and of itself.

An instantiation of this archival inversion that Cohen suggest is evident in the work of the Weimar censorship board, which meticulously documented every single film’s structure in

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Tom Cohen, *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 262.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

sequences and documented every intertitle on censorship cards prior to its release. The bureaucratic records of the censorship board, then, preserve the skeletons of the narrative and record the nodal points that anchors the flow of images through written text in these films, a great percentage of which have been lost. These lost films are now preserved and commemorated in the archive of censorship titles, cards, and descriptions. Of the extant films, the censorship board records have served as and continue to provide one of the most important means to reconstruct these films as accurately as possible. The archive that has been created by the bureaucratic necessity to regulate popular culture thus also serves another function. Since intertitles in silent cinema were historically the least important part of the film, especially because they were easily discarded for international circulation and replaced with differing titles, they constitute the frayed ephemeral edges of the image flow. As such, intertitles as writing in the film remain in the archival records as inscriptions after the images have faded away like old photographs or the film stock has disintegrated. In an ironic reversal, the bureaucracy of censorship gives the hope of permanence to the material record of these lost films, so that writing in film has become their excessive remainder with a fragmentary but profound residual value.

Kamilla Elliott's work marks a definitive break from what she calls the "celluloid Laocoön"<sup>144</sup> on the basis of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 work on the boundaries between the poetic and visual arts, towards a reconceptualization of the relations between "words" and "images." With regard to intertitles, she develops a critical catalogue that demonstrates how "visual/verbal categorizations break down at every level in the hybrid arts of illustrated novels and worded films."<sup>145</sup> These hybrid instances, as she argues, put "pressure on Lessing's most

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<sup>144</sup> Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

central categorization: the temporal and spatial dichotomy of words and images.”<sup>146</sup> For intertitles in silent film, to paraphrase Elliott, the notion of interruption or distraction “occupies a definitional place in discussions”<sup>147</sup> of film. As a means to move beyond the imagined confinements of intertitles, the films of F.W. Murnau have often been regarded as exemplary. Indeed, Murnau’s films serve as a useful starting point to develop an outline of some ramifications that writing in film establishes. Murnau himself contributed to this debate when he discussed the emergence of sound films and the future of the cinematic image. In an article entitled “Films of the Future” from 1928, Murnau states the following:

“I believe the cinema as a world power can offer possibilities beyond our imagination...The Chinese have an old saying: a picture is worth ten thousand words. I believe that this new invention, the sound film, will prevail ... and there will be films with actors speaking their lines from beginning to end. Maybe before these words are printed will you see such a picture on the screen. In certain areas the spoken word will obstruct the images ... [but] I don’t believe that all films will be talking pictures. The silent film will remain and develop into its perfect form, a film without a single written line. Films can be understood without explanatory titles that interrupt the flow of the action. I have tried this myself ... Television and radio will bring the film of the future into the houses of the audience with the turn of a key... I don’t know how to make films. Future developments will make our current efforts seem like child’s play, like the stuttering of an insecure tongue.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> F.W. Murnau, “Films of the Future,” *McCall’s Magazine*, September 1928, pp. 27, 90. Reprinted in *filmfaust* 12 (February 1979): 24 – 30. (Translation mine.)



While Murnau's innovations and contributions to the cinema as an art form are well established, such as his signature stylistics of depth of focus, the "unchained camera," his elaborate mise-en-scène, compositional arrangements, and lighting techniques, his films at the same time have often been relegated to the status of craftsmanship. That is, while Murnau is rightly considered one of the greatest directors in the history of the cinema, he is at the same time, the least intellectually controversial or conceptually significant. It is this peculiar conjunction that characterizes the current status of Murnau as a director. Conversely, however, while his films seem immediately accessible, his persona as a director remains enigmatic. Murnau's films, then, demarcate an interesting blind spot. They are considered important artistic works and yet they need not be elaborated *as* artistic contributions. This means that Murnau's films exemplify a form of self-evidence, which, in itself, is an effect that erases its own causality. In turn, the selfsame figure of Murnau as a director becomes yoked with the self-evidence of his images, so that a consideration of his work is inevitably tied to the images themselves. In other words, the figure of the director disappears as the images appear to begin to speak for themselves. Thus he has been established as a master craftsman whose unprecedented vision gave rise to a liberated camera, free from the confines of space, and as a cosmopolitan figure who was equally at home in the studios of Berlin as he was in Hollywood.

In his use of writing in film across national boundaries, Murnau demonstrates an intriguing recourse to a particular signature of limitation. This signifying figure traverses Murnau's filmic work overall, namely his haunting repetitions of a moment in which the desire for a visual geography of boundless space encounters its limit in what might be termed the letter of the law. Such recurring limit points delineate a visual crisis that Murnau's films configure across various permutations of his films: from the morbid landscapes of phantasmagoria in

*Nosferatu* to the expulsion from paradise on the oceans of the Pacific in *Tabu*. In these limit points that are configured as instances of writing, the inscriptions define a mode of subjectification in which writing posits itself as the limit point of desire and is therefore reflected back as subjectivity. If this corresponds to the expressed desire by Murnau to develop a “perfect form” of the silent film, then it indicates the importance Murnau placed on the configurations in which restrictions were transcended.

Gilles Deleuze demonstrates that Murnau’s recourse to a particular mode of subjectivity is inherently linked to a process of desire which explicates how writing becomes what Deleuze terms “an abstract universality”<sup>149</sup> that posits an “immediate life which has no need of language,”<sup>150</sup> whereas “the intertitle or piece of writing shows the law, the forbidden, the transmitted order.”<sup>151</sup> Deleuze’s delineation of intertitles as a set of boundaries which positions life in relation to the law and transmission by way of its mediality determines a consistent visual figuration of writing in Murnau’s films. These figurations enforce a boundary of inscription onto images against the vectoral forces of desire that attempt to escape these boundaries. In this confrontation, Murnau develops a visual theory of writing as a force that thus determines the ways of subjectification and at the same time enacts its virtual potential for transcendence.

Since more than half of Murnau’s oeuvre has been lost, this assessment can only be made through his extant films in this respect, five of which are readily available and still in circulation

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<sup>149</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 225.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

as well as through four lesser-known films.<sup>152</sup> By investigating two instances of the recurring tropes of boundaries through Murnau's use of letters, titles, and intertitles, we can see Murnau's exemplary ability, in Elsaesser's terms, to "naturalize artifice"<sup>153</sup> as a means to encapsulate the desire for transcendence for which his textual limit points define visual boundaries. To put it differently, as a means to configure the desire to escape the processes of subjectification, Murnau's films are "marked by fluid boundaries – junctions that trace the subtle connection between entities rather than their clear demarcation," as Lucy Fischer has demonstrated in her study of Murnau's *Sunrise*.<sup>154</sup> These fluid connections evince a desire that constantly attempts to escape demarcations, in particular the boundaries of self that are imposed by the social contract as legible manifestations in writing.

In *Nosferatu* the concept of reading is directly linked to the ability to understand the vampire, Nosferatu. Briefly, the film involves the vampire Count Orlok, who becomes interested in an old house, located next door to the home of two young lovers, Ellen (or Nina)<sup>155</sup> and Jonathan Hutter (or Harker), in the town of Wisborg. On behalf of a real-estate agent, Hutter travels to the Carpathian to finalize the contract for the house with the Count. Warned by the concerned local townsfolk, who give him a copy of a book on vampires, he nonetheless spends

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<sup>152</sup> The five most well-known films are *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Last Laugh* (1924), *Faust* (1926), *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), and *Tabu* (1931), as well as the four available ones *The Burning Earth* (1922), *Phantom* (1922), *Tartüff* (1925), and *City Girl* (1929).

<sup>153</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Secret Affinities," *Sight and Sound* 58, no. 1 (winter 1988/89): 35.

<sup>154</sup> Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (London: BFI Publishing 1998), p. 8.

<sup>155</sup> The characters' names differ in the various versions of this film that are available, since Murnau wanted to avoid any similarity with the characters' names in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, from which he had borrowed extensively, for legal reasons.

the night in the Count's castle. Hutter ridicules the book and casually throws it away to emphasize his inability to register the power of the written word. Furthermore, he is unable to "read" the physical signs of the vampire's markings on his neck that have appeared after he has spent the night.<sup>156</sup> Dismissing the marks as mosquito bites, he fails to understand their significance. Indeed, in his letters to Ellen he demonstrates a remarkable lack of understanding his surroundings. It is Ellen, therefore, who will use and process the knowledge of the book on vampires, driven by "a strange compulsion" as an intertitle informs. The Count seems to be the recipient of Ellen's "strange compulsions," and decides to travel by boat to the visit the town and his new house, bringing with him death and pestilence to the town until Ellen's desire brings him to her and her sexual sacrifice precipitates his death in the morning light.

As a narration, the film itself is structured within the textual framework of a book, so that the writing implies a spectator as a reader of the texts within the film already. The film begins with a commonplace image in the cinema, the opening of a book. It is an anonymous account of the "Great Plague in 1838" that befell the town of Wisborg. Since the author is dead, designated on the cover sheet of the book by three crosses, the enunciating voice of the images to come is itself a "nosferatu" or an "undead."<sup>157</sup> This voice of the narrating subject will return as an "I" in

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<sup>156</sup> Cf. Ursula von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre: Über 'Erzählen' und 'Sehen' bei Murnau," in *Die Metaphysik des Dekors: Raum, Architektur und Licht im klassischen deutschen Stummfilm*, ed. Klaus Kreimeier (Marburg: Schüren, 1994), p. 83.

<sup>157</sup> The etymological origin of the word *nosferatu* remains apocryphal. Thomas Elsaesser states that it is a "Romanian word for 'the undead.'" Cf. Thomas Elsaesser, "Six Degrees of Nosferatu," *Sight and Sound* 11, no. 2 (February 2001): 13. The producer of the film, Albin Grau, is cited as relating the story that he listened to an account of a Serbian peasant who witnessed firsthand the exorcism of a *nosferatu*, Serbo-Croatian for "undead." Cf. Lotte Eisner, *Murnau* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 109, and Fred Gehler and

the intertitles sporadically until the end when the titles state that “I have learned” and “all was quiet.” It speaks, therefore, beyond the grave to the spectator, who will, in turn, witness the characters’ achievement or failure to comprehend the text itself. This instance of the *mise-en-abyme* that the film actualizes is likewise reflected in the notion of subjectivity, which constantly returns to a position of indeterminacy throughout the film.

In particular the character of Ellen, who becomes the causal agent of the destruction of Nosferatu by delivering its redemption into death through her own sacrifice, remains enigmatic. She is the one who communicates with both Hutter and the Nosferatu telepathically across the vast distances of space. Her final work before her submission to the vampire is a needlepoint pillow with the ornately written message *Ich liebe dich*. This token of “I love you,” however, does not indicate the recipient of this message because in its ambiguous appeal it addresses both Hutter and Nosferatu. These “misdirected” instances of communication emphasize the fluidity of subjectivity here, since desire is articulated here through the potential of misrecognition. By contrast, the notion of the contract ostensibly establishes a firm legal clarity. As Count Orlok introduces himself via his agent and a letter written in cabalistic gibberish, the intertitle indicates

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Ulrich Kasten, *Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1990), p. 41. Given his traditional classical education in secondary school and his subsequent studies in philology, Murnau, who had to change the name to “Nosferatu” from “Dracula” to avoid his obvious plagiarism, would undoubtedly have noticed the homonymous Latin *nos ferat*, “he may carry us,” and may have derived great pleasure out of such implications. In addition, the fact that the ship which carries Nosferatu across the seas is named *Demeter* adds another degree of allusion, since, as Evans Lansing Smith explains, Demeter is the “mother of Death” because in Greek mythology she is the “mother of Persephone, whose yearly abduction into Hades was reënacted during the Classical Mysteries of Eleusis.” Cf. Evans Lansing Smith, “Framing the Underworld: Threshold Imagery in Murnau, Cocteau and Bergman,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (July 1996): 24.

an accurate translation of the secret writing as an exchange for contractual clarity, which will form the basis for a real-estate contract, a territorial move that will allow the Count to inhabit the ruins of the warehouses that face Ellen's cottage. The enunciating voice in the intertitle here is that of a translator, rendering in plain language what has been obscured by the enigmatic signs. This notion of clarity is then reinvoked when the same contract is once again laid on the table in Orlok's castle.

The Count, however, ignores the exchange which the contract stipulates when he notices Hutter's amulet with a photograph of Ellen. Mesmerized by her beauty, the Count forgets the original reason for his guest's visit as she ostensibly becomes the object of his desire. This initiates a shift from the written contract to the photographic memento of Ellen in an exchange of looks between Hutter and the Count that suggests a transference of desire via the image as a substitute. "Your wife has a beautiful neck" reads the intertitle, but the title is, like the photographic image of Ellen, a mere reproduction that serves as the relay through which the Count can channel his desire to imprint his own physical marks onto Hutter that night. That is, the photographic image of Ellen replaces their contractual obligations and instead becomes the linkage for the bond that is to be established between Hutter and the Count. A similar counter-current of desire occurs soon after and traces the interconnectedness between the characters as entities. While the image seems to depict Ellen who is on the shore eagerly awaiting and beckoning the arrival of Hutter, she is dressed in black and surrounded by crosses, which posits the Count as the recipient of Ellen's desire against the normative construction of the narrative.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> While Robin Wood does not notice the ramifications of this profound dissolution of the boundaries of the normative subject, he does register that Ellen desires a "kind of demonic alternative husband," so that it appears that "Jonathan and Nosferatu are really the same character." That is, their union is consummated through the

Siegfried Kracauer seems to register as much when he notes Murnau's "faculty of obliterating boundaries between the real and the unreal"<sup>159</sup> in this respect. The film articulates a desire as an appellation towards Nosferatu and as an embrace of the destructive force that he brings with him. The assumed boundaries that the film invokes turn out to function as reciprocal channels of desire and communication, so that the basis for distinguishing between such registers of limitations is dissolved. This mechanism of dissolution will become a fundamental mode in Murnau's films and it extends to another dimension as well.

The contractual writing and its communication are hidden in hieroglyphic abstraction, as in the opening scenes when the Count's letter to his mediator and representative in the Wisborg, Knock, arrives and is rendered in cabalistic abstractions, emphasizing a limitation of knowledge by postulating a spectator who cannot decipher the hieroglyphic writing. As a remarkable instance of critical investment, the work of Sylvain Exertier seems to exemplify a historicist detective in this context for its possibility of reading clues. In his article "La Lettre Oubliée de Nosferatu," published in the French film journal *Positif*, Exertier goes to astonishing lengths to decipher the letter in its cabalistic, secret, and occult meanings.<sup>160</sup> Exertier interprets the cryptograms in a hermeneutic process, as he uncovers their inherent meaning, steeped in fidelity to the "occult" and "esoteric" tradition. Moreover, he declares, that the letter to Knock, in fact, corresponds to the letter with the plot development of the film overall. That is, each cryptogram

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substitutional figure of Ellen, who becomes the contractual item of exchange between them. Cf. Robin Wood,

"Murnau I: Nosferatu," *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (May – June 1976): 8.

<sup>159</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 78.

<sup>160</sup> Sylvain Exertier, "La Lettre Oubliée de Nosferatu," *Positif*, no. 228 (March 1980): 47. (Translation mine.)

has its function in the letter to announce the Count's journey and his intentions and in this sense encapsulates the desire of the Count.

While acknowledging the brevity of the letter's duration on the screen, Exertier nonetheless marvels at the meticulous craft with which the letter has been rendered faithful to an esoteric reading, indeed, faithful to its very legibility itself, despite the fact that "it is impossible to notice the meaning [*signification*] of this text during the few seconds of its duration on the screen [*passage à l'écran*]." <sup>161</sup> He attempts to demonstrate with the deciphering of the occult codes that the letter contains and enacts, in a reversal of the heraldic function of the *mise-en-abyme* for the overall film, a potential spectator with the eyes of the occultist. What Exertier achieves here is to develop a sense of how Murnau uses writing to posit and define subjective positions. The attention Exertier accords the production design, then, demonstrates that there can be subject positions in relation to the text on the screen that transcend the limits of temporality. In other words, a legible subject position has been established that remains outside the confines of the film itself, but nonetheless finds its articulation in Exertier. His work, then, is not only that of the hermeneut but becomes that of the historian whose subject position in the present is addressed by the minute artifacts of the past.

Such an emphasis on how a reading viewer might be postulated in Murnau's films also animates Ursula von Keitz' investigation in which she defines a particular kind of subjectivity that Murnau's films engender and engage. In the same manner in which *Nosferatu* suggest the

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 51. Exertier also notes that this might be Murnau's "wink to the occultists," particularly given its legibility to a reader conversant in occultist cryptograms: "Ce qui étonne dans ce texte est sa relative lisibilité, les textes ésotériques étant généralement écrits sous la forme de grimoires, illisibles sans l'aide d'une grille, que seuls possèdent le magiste et son correspondant. Ici chaque signe est signifiant, *Nosferatu* ne craint donc pas d'être lu par d'autres que Knock, peut-être et certainement parce que la lettre ne révèle pas de secret important." Cf. p. 47.



force of subjectification that writing imposes, both *Phantom* (1922) and *The Last Laugh* operate, in von Keitz' terms, as a visualized *Verschriftung* (a process of "scripturalization") that incorporates the viewer.<sup>162</sup> Whereas *Nosferatu* invokes a temporal disjunction by which the viewer "enacts" a reading of the images and is consequently subjectified in the position of a reader, *Phantom*, based on Gerhart Hauptmann's novel, dissolves the viewer into the space of writing itself.<sup>163</sup> Its opening shot shows the author Gerhart Hauptmann himself, holding a book in his hand and looking directly into the camera. His gaze then turns left where a match cut shows a house on a meadow. The film, then, forces the viewer into the "writing" of the author Hauptmann, whose gaze leads us into space of the house, where the protagonist Lorenz Lubota begins to write his life's story into a blank notebook, which, in turn, dissolves and frames the film as a flashback account of his writing.

Von Keitz notes the intriguing ambiguity with which frames and boundaries are dissolved by an "unhinging of the signs – both written text and sound – from the source of their production, which leads to the animation of the signs themselves."<sup>164</sup> In this sense, the viewer becomes a "witness of a process of consciousness" by which the act of writing "visualizes" and actualizes its own process, authorized by the presence of both the real and the fictitious author in the image. In turn, the gaze of the camera articulates the "vision-object"<sup>165</sup> of the writer, hence

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<sup>162</sup> Ursula von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre," p. 85.

<sup>163</sup> *Phantom*, screenplay by Thea von Harbou, was based on the novel of the same name by the author and playwright Gerhart Hauptmann. The film premiered on the occasion of Hauptmann's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday under the auspices of a benefit event in support of impoverished writers. Cf. Ursula von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre," p. 86.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. (Translation mine.)

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

the eyes of the writer and the viewer's are fused in a doubled point of view that is both subjective and objective, both detached from and defined by the source of its production.<sup>166</sup> Murnau's achievement, according to von Keitz, is to emphasize this process of subjectivization through his use of the "unchained camera," exemplified most remarkably in his film *The Last Laugh*. In the film's contemporary criticism, as well as in Murnau's own recollection, the film celebrated the fact that this was a film without any intertitles at all. Kamilla Elliott notes that the irritation with intertitles can be found "among hundreds"<sup>167</sup> of reviews and critical accounts of film during the 1920s.

Von Keitz limits herself to a notion of subjectification in the sense of the secondary identification process that the camera apparatus entails. The film documents the gradual and tragic decline in status of a hotel porter, who, as a figure of authority epitomized by his uniform, loses this position of power as a figurehead representative of the hotel. Embarrassed by this, he attempts to cover up the loss of social standing through a pretentious clinging to delusions of grandeur. He is finally demoted to the position of washroom attendant in the basement of the hotel where he awaits his death. *The Last Laugh*, von Keitz asserts, is characterized by shifts between "objective viewing" and "subjective points of view" that allow the film to "mediate the consciousness of the protagonist."<sup>168</sup> This is literalized, then, in a sequence where the protagonist reads his letter of dismissal as his eyes attempt to focus on the word *Schwäche* (weakness). A

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<sup>166</sup> This process would more accurately describe a prominent instance of Murnau's use of an intertitle in *Sunrise*, where a farmer is seduced by a city girl on vacation who suggests to him the possible fate of his wife. The title depicts her ominous question "couldn't she get drowned?" as the letters dissolve and "drown" themselves on the screen.

<sup>167</sup> Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, p. 18.

<sup>168</sup> Von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre," p. 81.

medium close-up shows the porter's adjusting his glasses, which is followed by an extreme close-up where we see through his point of view the blurring of the letters. Von Keitz here does not interrogate Murnau's own claim that *The Last Laugh* represents the epitome of images and has approximated the ideal of cinema, since in Murnau's words, "an ideal picture needs no titles."<sup>169</sup> As Murnau hopes, the future of the medium will lie in films that severely restrict titles and thus and ultimately move towards a method of "[s]ymbolism that would obviate titles."<sup>170</sup> He draws a literary analogy here to James Joyce, whose work, Murnau states, "picturizes the mind."<sup>171</sup>

Remarkably, despite these claims, *The Last Laugh* incorporates an extraordinary amount of writing into the film beyond the significant intrusion of the one intertitle that introduces a coda to the film. For von Keitz, however, the subjectivization process that Murnau's films mobilize are produced by the cinematic apparatus itself in a form of empathy. Thus, she argues, the relation between spectator, protagonist, and point of view is triangulated by the way in which the film "concretizes the referential perception, which in [Murnau's] previous films had been established only through the interaction of language and image, by always already shaping the images in the manner of how the protagonist perceives his environment."<sup>172</sup> Here Murnau might concur, since, for all intents and purposes, the film adheres to his stated goal to find the images for the ideal, that is, "titleless" picture. All the more disconcerting, then, is the question of how to

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<sup>169</sup> F.W. Murnau, "The Ideal Picture Needs No Titles," *Theatre Magazine*, no. 47 (January 1928): 41, 72.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre," p. 86.

integrate the decisive intervention that the film's one prominent use of an intertitle stages.<sup>173</sup> After the protagonist is demoted and reduced to working in the basement lavatory, the image sequence portends a tragic ending. The camera closes in on him as he sinks down alongside the bathroom wall, alone, exhausted, and humiliated, and slowly awaiting his inevitable death. However, an intertitle suddenly and without narrative motivation appears.

"The author taking pity on our hapless protagonist and his life," the intertitle declares, "the film will now change the outcome of the story," whereupon the porter inherits a fortune by one of his lavatory patrons, "A.G. Money," and his fate is reversed. He becomes a guest in his own hotel and indulges in all the luxuries available. He leaves the hotel by horse carriage, celebrated and cheered by all around him, guests and staff alike, and invites a beggar from the street to join him and sit next to him in the carriage. While some critics define this as a moment demanded by UFA for economic reasons to ensure a "happy" and thus popular ending<sup>174</sup> or even see it as a "critique of capitalistic fairytales that the self-reflexive rapture seems to suggest,"<sup>175</sup> Kracauer avers that the "concluding sequence corroborates its introductory caption in that it expresses the author's disbelief" in his own fabrication and thus "[t]hrough its second ending the film underscores the significance of the first one."<sup>176</sup>

It is through this concept of fabrication that the social character of the intertitle becomes legible. The film has continued a vector of abject desire, and thereby, according to von Keitz, has created a degree of identification in which the self and the other merge through empathy, since

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<sup>173</sup> An issue which is conveniently ignored in most accounts, including Murnau's own.

<sup>174</sup> Cf. Stephan Schindler, "What Makes a Man a Man: The Construction of Masculinity in F.W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh*," *Screen* 37, no. 1 (spring 1996): 32.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>176</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 101.

the film's equation of the camera with the inner "eye" of the protagonist has suggested a means of obliterating the boundaries of the self.<sup>177</sup> But the intervention of the intertitle affirms that the powers of subjectification lie elsewhere. The "authorial" intervention asserts authority and its powers of definition as a benevolent force at the moment when the force of transference towards empathy is at its greatest. The pity with the petit-bourgeois porter, who has pursued a delusional attempt to identify himself with real authority figures, has created a troubling mode of identification for a sense of self. When the intertitle appears, then, the self is reconstructed in relation to a larger power.<sup>178</sup> This conforms to what Thomas Elsaesser has outlined elsewhere as a "particular historical subjectivity: that of the German petit-bourgeois, identifying himself with the State."<sup>179</sup> Elsaesser relates this to Benjamin's gnomic observation of the "aestheticization of politics" in fascism. The pleasure that the intervention of the intertitle generates, then, lies, in Elsaesser's terms, in the "pleasure of being seen by others,"<sup>180</sup> the pleasure that is categorically denied to the porter in his pitiful desire for respect. The intertitle reverses this denial and imposes

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<sup>177</sup> Stephan Schindler reads this notion of identity through the category of constructed gender differences via the power of the gaze. He asserts that the film confronts the spectator with a "schizophrenic twist" in power, since the porter exhibits an appearance anxiety that is determined by the "gaze of women" who construct the "doorman's imaginary identity" through the power of "the female gaze that grants and destroys male sovereignty, a power which the film seems to display as female character deficiency when it is used against men." Cf. Schindler, "The Construction of Masculinity," p. 36.

<sup>178</sup> This moment is still extremely effective, even today. In screenings of the film in front of actual audiences there is often a gasp of relief or cheer audible when the intertitle appears.

<sup>179</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Primary Identification and the Historical Subject: Fassbinder and Germany," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 544.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 545.

a force of subjectivity which binds the audience to a different identificatory force again. It allows the experience of the “pleasure of being seen,” as Elsaesser defines the “pleasure of fascism, ... of placing oneself in view of the all-seeing eye of the State”<sup>181</sup> again.

These observations may serve to indicate some of the directions that this study of the writing on the German screen will follow. In the following chapter I trace the figurations of how authority is articulated through writing in two films that define the arc of the Weimar Republic and its cinema, Robert Wiene’s silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and the early sound film by G.W Pabst, *Kameradschaft* (1931). Chapter three investigates how writing is used as a social force that in both *Mabuse* films and *M* by Fritz Lang inscribes vicious patterns of circularity in the inescapable movements of legal logic that allegorize a *Teufelskreis* or “vicious circle” as a form of punishment through entrapment. Chapter four returns to the figure of authority, but this time through a close reading of the archival documents of censorship decisions in the early years of the Weimar republic that have recently become available for scholarly inspection. Through these I reconstruct a historical figure that has all but disappeared, namely Carl Bulcke, the first head of the Berlin censorship board from 1919 to 1924. In his legal decisions, preserved as written records, the contested constructions of citizenship become legible

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid. Against this subjectification and the imposition of the boundaries of self that the writing here generates, Murnau posits writing in a different figure that invalidates the law of the letter as moving against the currents of desire in the final images of his last film *Tabu* (1931), filmed and set in Polynesia. In the final scene a young boy drowns in the ocean in a desperate attempt to swim after the boat that is carrying his illicit lover away. He dissolves in death along with the letters that have spelled out the social constraints against their love, namely the word “taboo.” As the letters “drown” in the ocean along with him, the constraints are finally dissolved in a Romanticist gesture that suggests a transcendence in transience, in an oblique analogy to the inscription of John Keats’ gravestone as “one whose name is writ in water.”

as they are enacted by the nameless bureaucrat who attempts to understand the figurations of the films' ideal audience and who attempts to intervene in them on behalf of the state.

If Bulcke serves as the proxy figure for the state, then Nazi film renders this imaginary figure as a suffering body. In marked contrast to the uses of writing in Weimar cinema, Nazi film eliminates some very specific figurations of writing by returning to a rhetoric of passion via scriptural marks, stigmata, and signs of suffering. In chapter five I delineate these allegorical modes of inscription through the star figure of Emil Jannings in *Ohm Krüger*, one of the most popular films at the height of Nazi power. Chapter six examines the difficulties early post-war German film encountered in its attempts at rearticulating the conceptions of the state, which is evident in their return to an insistent and obsessive use of writing, by looking at two films by Wolfgang Staudte, *Die Mörder sind unter Uns* and *Rotation*. Staudte is a figure who himself embodies some of the divisions and constraints of the period after the war from which a divided Germany emerged. The ways in which he constructs a political consensus in these films, I contend, demonstrate incipient figurations of the power of the state that are still constructed as allegorizations, but which relegate their faith into religious iconography. An epilogue suggests further trajectories of the lines of argument that have been delineated through Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1979 film *Die Dritte Generation* about the convergence of terrorism and the media in which the inflationary use of writing becomes a visual assault, and the 1998 film *23*, based on actual events surrounding the death of a computer hacker in 1980s West Germany, whose activities resulted in both an imaginary delusional paranoia and his actual persecution by state authorities.

Ultimately, however, if this work may indicate the already-known, if it only confirms that for which we have already settled the terms of explanation, then it merely reflects the trouble that

the continuing insistence of a historicism as the mode of determining “what it was really like” exerts. In other words, the problem with the “already-known” is analogous to the problem of historicism in that it assumes the responsibility of historical work to be a static exercise of confirmation. In this case, the potential for the confirmation of the received consensus or the recognized frameworks of understanding history may have at least been arrived at in dynamic terms as a heuristic process of investigation into some of the unexplored elements of writing, which, to its credit, would make it a means of generating a knowledge of limitations or a return to the basis of these limitations once again. If this is the case, then the writing on the screen will be inflected again into the diffuse and centripetal movements within the vast stream of images once more and it will have found another figure for its completion by folding back into itself, no longer to be noticed.



**CHAPTER TWO: THE FIGURE OF AUTHORITY IN *THE CABINET OF DR.*  
*CALIGARI* AND *KAMERADSCHAFT***

In any historical account of the importance of Weimar cinema, its imaginary narrative implied by the arc of the trajectory among its well-known works from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) seems almost too self-evident and portentous, almost too “German Expressionist” in its sense of catastrophic fate and conjecture of rampant powers, and must therefore invite a certain scholarly skepticism. Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* and Lotte Eisner’s study *The Haunted Screen* have cast their long shadows on this period, so to speak, and imposed a sense of interpretive and deterministic inevitability. Indeed, Thomas Elsaesser’s recent reassessment of Weimar cinema takes this uncanny “convergence of image with its object”<sup>1</sup> as its basis to investigate how we should account for the fact that Weimar cinema “allowed such a ‘fit’ between film and history to remain convincing for so long”<sup>2</sup> in order to declare that in all likelihood no knowledge “will dislodge that now quasi-existential

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

bond between a group of films and the subsequent fate of the society that produced and consumed them.”<sup>3</sup>

For Elsaesser, this historical imaginary is “perfectly understandable”<sup>4</sup> and at the same time no longer necessary or relevant as anything other than a historical imaginary to be defined as such. Understandable, that is, because the horrors of the Nazi years were so fundamentally unimaginable that “history itself in this case required the in(ter)vention of an imaginary” that could render “the unspeakable to enter into an order of temporality and discourse, however inadequate and banal.”<sup>5</sup> This imaginary, Elsaesser continues, allows an “unrepresentable history” to be configured through the “illusion of a hidden truth” into a “symptomatology, so perfectly readable – with hindsight.”<sup>6</sup> As a countermeasure, therefore, Elsaesser proposes to “restore” and “give back” to Weimar films “some of their other possible futures, rather than keep them the ones that history (the historical imaginary) seems to have locked them into.”<sup>7</sup>

This is a remarkable project, not least because it corresponds to an apodictic state of thinking which Elsaesser has declared elsewhere for the “idea” of the German cinema, namely that now “we can afford to pay a little less attention to [its] best-known periods: the 1920s and the 1970s.”<sup>8</sup> Are we “done” with these decades? Can we now lay to rest the disturbing relations between Weimar cinema and Nazism? Is it possible to ascribe to this cinema a difference in understanding which restores and redeems it from the taints of its unfortunate future? In other

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 112.

words, have we finally determined its legacy as a future, or “come to terms” with its history in a sense that echoes but inverts the way in which the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* implies an overcoming of history by “working through” the past as a form of “coming to terms with the future” or *Zukunftsbewältigung*? Elsaesser himself poses such a declaration as a rhetorical question and asks “how far do we need this imaginary today? Are we still looking to films for explanations of Nazism?”<sup>9</sup> before he shifts the terms of the discussion of Weimar cinema in order to “relieve” it from “the grip of symptomatology” in a kind of reverse exorcism that counters its seemingly insurmountable and perpetual demonization.<sup>10</sup>

Sympathetic as we may be to the appeal of this tendency – and who would not want to lay to rest once and for all the spectre of fascism? – there is something unsettling and perturbing itself in such categorical declarations of finality. Elsaesser charts a fundamental significance in the methodology that a select number of films in the cinema of the Weimar period have come to stand in for or represent an entire explanatory apparatus that narrativizes their function as epiphenomenal “clues” to a history to come, so that the “film critic or historian has to turn detective, alert to every index or clue”<sup>11</sup> in his role to verify the outcome which the cluster of these films are proposed to have signaled toward. Precisely because the films’ status as a prefiguration of the Nazi period leaves them locked into this duplicitous constraint they seem to be destined to encourage a “special hermeneutic activity.”<sup>12</sup> Presumably, then, this kind of hermeneutic investigation, which the films themselves seem to invite and facilitate, is no longer

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<sup>9</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

necessary once we unhinge the films from their inevitably situated chronology of proximity and understand their function in the historical imaginary. Instead, Elsaesser's promise is an approach that opens up another possibility of returning to the past, of salvaging the films from the impossible burden of their future, so that they can be looked at anew and need not be marshaled as evidence in order to explain their function as historical documents once more.

While the value of this undertaking may be relevant and perhaps even liberating for a reë appraisal of this period in cinema history, it does not necessarily follow that we should accept that the films, in Elsaesser's words, work only because of their systematic refusal "to be 'tied down' to a single meaning."<sup>13</sup> As he determines, this quality makes these films particularly suited to "resist reference" and thus serve to call for a "spectator constructing 'allegories of meaning,'"<sup>14</sup> which, in turn, enables the films to lend themselves to be solicited for the development of a historical argument. In other words, just because there exists the necessity of a meaning that needs to be derived "allegorically" after the fact, does not invalidate the problem that there is a fundamental process of allegorization which takes place already in the films themselves. Even though the films that stand in for this particular type of imaginary lend themselves to an allegorized or symptomatic reading, we might need to postulate that films constitute certain modes of allegorization from the outset. In the case of German cinema, then, this categorical principle of allegorization came into stark relief once the cinema became the legitimate grounds for historical investigation. That is, how is this process of allegorization generally "hidden" in such a way that we do not recognize it as a process in and of itself so that we can only accept it as a symptom for the desires of historical interpretation rather than

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

understanding the issue of allegory as symptomatic for its own interpretive construction in the process? And finally, what if we did restore to these films a certain sense of “duplicious innocence,” a paradoxical concept that Elsaesser invokes in his introduction?<sup>15</sup> Perhaps then it will become possible to chart different trajectories in the study of films for a period that has so frequently been used to elucidate the question of how nation and history are conjoined in the cinema. Elsaesser’s shift allows for a reconceptualization of a number of these categories that have been yoked under the rubric of Weimar cinema, yet this shift does not absolve us from abandoning these terms altogether. Rather, it becomes precisely necessary to return to the films and investigate the parameters by which they need to be approached in order to determine their continuing relevance.

First and foremost, it should alert us that a concept such as “allegory” is so frequently invoked by Elsaesser and yet, at the same time, most often seems to refer to a kind of transparent notion of self-reflexivity as a meta-discursive secondary effect that the films generate. In this sense, allegory becomes the blind-spot that remains permanently visible and yet nonetheless diverts attention from itself by functioning so immediately while seeming accessible. Or, to put it in a more succinct way, as Tom Gunning has stated, “few film historians have paused to reflect on the great resurrection of allegory within silent cinema.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the stylistic prevalence that Elsaesser accords the allegorical dimension of Weimar cinema, he does not grant the mode any other significance apart from its apparently tempting ability to structure interpretive schemata for the film historian, whose task, it seems, is merely to develop a process of verification in

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 26.

retrospect. In this sense, allegory functions for Elsaesser as a “mere mode of designation,” which, as Walter Benjamin states, is a prejudicial misconception of the importance of allegory because allegory is “not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is.”<sup>17</sup> This indicates the importance of understanding allegory not merely as a secondary “symptom,” but as a primary and profound mode of signification, which, precisely because it seems as self-evident as speech and writing appear in their expressive functions, is usually relegated to a level of illustration.

The debates on the allegorical dimension of the German cinema that Elsaesser intends to put to rest here might best be understood as a gesture towards a conception of progressive history, which can be divided into discrete entities. Here, however, the argument is not so much defined as a nostalgia for the past but rather as a reconstruction of the present and its concerns with history. In this respect, Elsaesser obliquely engages Eric Santner, who defines a particular “semantic field” in which critical “discourses, primarily poststructuralist in inspiration, appear committed to the vigilant and radical critique of what are taken to be the narcissisms and nostalgias central to the project of modernity – namely Enlightenment faith in progress.”<sup>18</sup> In their discursive structure, these critiques turn into “discourses of bereavement [that] see in the harrowing labor of mourning one’s various narcissisms and nostalgias a source of empowerment.”<sup>19</sup> As Santner demonstrates, these critiques frequently are developed with an affinity to a Benjaminian definition of the baroque, since “Benjamin suggests that the greatness

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1996), p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

of the baroque lay precisely in its insight into the irreducible elegiac dimension of signification, which for Benjamin is to be seen in the allegorical mode.”<sup>20</sup>

Elsaesser does not reserve much patience for this critical affinity, nor does he allow for the validity of a fundamental merging between the task of the critic and the area of exploration, which, in Santner’s terms, determines that the historian finds herself “marooned in a world of ruins, fragments, stranded objects that thereby take on a textual aspect: they demand to be read.”<sup>21</sup> There might be ascribed a disingenuous, even narcissist, motive in the hermeneutic desire succumb to these demands, yet the fragmentation that accompanies the leveling of meaning into such ruins does not only entail a reassembly of random recombinations. Rather, since these elegiac readings yield the failures and limit points of interpretation and, in doing so, point to the aporias of historical understanding, Santner continues, “one must wonder whether the elaboration of those failures... can also be understood as a gesture of genuine anamnesis and mourning toward the Holocaust and its victims.”<sup>22</sup> Recently, important critical directions have been opened up that continue this work of anamnesis without reducing it to a mode of narcissist recognition of the critical self in the limit points defined by the nexus between memory and history. Giorgio Agamben, for example, has deliberately refused to accept the aporia that leaves unexamined the condition of camps because it reduces them, as he states, to “the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized: this is ultimately all

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

that counts for the victims as well as for posterity.”<sup>23</sup> Instead, Agamben seeks to investigate the conditions of the camps in light of an understanding that they constitute the “*nomos* of the political space in which we still live.”<sup>24</sup> Gil Anidjar, for example, has continued this demand for examination by providing a far-ranging investigation into the linguistic conditions of the camps that make visible, as he calls it, “the theologico-political history of absolute subjection.”<sup>25</sup>

What this means is that the inevitability of fragmented interpretations, which arises out of the radical ambiguity and the rebus-like quality that constructs the teleology of Weimar cinema into a field of “picture puzzles,”<sup>26</sup> should not be understood as a foreclosure or end to the kind of appreciation and “‘serious’ study”<sup>27</sup> Elsaesser wants to establish in its stead. But, once Weimar cinema has been “liberated” from its future interpretations, this approach does not, in turn, liberate us from the necessity of taking its principles of allegorization into account or allow us to dismiss it as a by-product of a mere hermeneutic desire. That is, rather than relegating the films’ mode of allegorization to an epiphenomenon which arises from the secondary effect of the urge for understanding, it becomes necessary to explain and chart its pervasive filmic prevalence and manifestations by other means. If we are to take seriously once again the films of the Weimar period, we must ask why it is that the presence of allegorization is something that transcends any particular generic or thematic boundaries and whether this, then, indicates a cinematic mode of

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<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Gil Anidjar, “Muslims (Hegel, Freud, Auschwitz),” in *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



expression that forces us to reconceive the framework that we impose on historical periodizations and which serve as the basis for the historical imaginary that Elsaesser invokes.

Moreover, if it is a fundamental presence that we can locate in a range of films, it seems important to reconfigure the “will-to-interpretation” not as a felicitous, inevitable, or inconsequential result but, rather, as an integral element inscribed into the films in order to determine the trajectories that have been submerged within the constraints of Weimar cinema’s imaginary, which, after all, is what Elsaesser proposes to do as well in his project to make possible a “different look at Weimar cinema.”<sup>28</sup> However, this project demands that we return to the very films that have been established as the interpretive canon that stands in for Weimar cinema’s historical status and have functioned as its representatives. The questions that need to be asked, then, in order to delineate the tasks and responsibilities of the film historian are the ones that Weimar cinema can now open up for us again and are to be found in a Weimar cinema reexamined.

Here, then, is a symptomatic conjunction across the trajectory that unites two films commonly thought to form milestones from the beginning and the end of Weimar cinema, namely *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) and *Kameradschaft* (G.W. Pabst, 1931). In Robert Wiene’s film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the small town of Holstenwall is in the grips of fear because of a series of murders. During the course of an investigation into these mysterious murders, suspicion falls on a traveling carnival performer who calls himself Dr. Caligari and his attraction, a somnambulist named Cesare. Fleeing from the investigation led by the protagonist Francis, Caligari is traced to the local insane asylum, where Francis asks to see the hospital’s director and discovers, to his surprise, that the director and Caligari are one and the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

same person. In order to shed light on this seemingly bizarre and inexplicable convergence, Francis enlists the help of three members of the asylum's staff and at night they ransack the director's study in search for answers. Going through his books and manuscripts they come across a 1726 compendium published by the University of Uppsala on somnambulism, which, as an intertitle explains, is the director's "special field of study." In this tome they discover the story of one Dr. Caligari who, as we read now page for page on the screen, "toured the fair grounds of certain small towns of northern Italy accompanied by his somnambulist Cesare" and committed a series of murders in these towns by enslaving the somnambulist and "compelling him to carry out his will." Because the scenarios described in the compendium are identical to the ones that Holstenwall has endured, Francis begins to search frantically through the director's diary.

On the pages of the diary, Francis discovers a joyful entry that reads as a title on the screen "finally – finally – they have reported the admission to the asylum of a somnambulist." A image sequence then provides the flashback which recounts how pleased the director is to accept the "specimen" of a somnambulist among his patients. The director verifies the patient's status as a somnambulist by flipping excitedly through an old book, presumably the Uppsala compendium, and becomes so ecstatic that he rips apart its pages. The flashback sequence is punctuated by iris-opens and iris-closes in which the group is shown reading eagerly in the lower-screen left and which underscore that what is seen on the upper screen-right corresponds to what Francis and the hospital staff are reading on the pages. The act of reading and the manifestation of the text occur on same plane on the screen, but the movement between the act of reading itself and that which is conjured up by the reading is marked by the iris transitions. Along with Francis and the trio of doctors, we read but do not yet see on the screen what the doctor-director reveals in his diary, namely that "the irresistible passion of my life is being

fulfilled,” which is to “learn if it is true that a somnambulist can be compelled to perform acts which, in a waking state, would be abhorrent to him.” From this written entry an intertitle declares that the director is “in the grip of an obsession,” and we see the director, obsessed by his desire for knowledge, clutching the compendium. Another title states that he is about to convince himself that he “must become Caligari.” In the subsequent image sequence we see the director ambling in a frenzy toward the camera while he is still clinging to his book. He pauses, looks up and his right hand gestures traces across an imaginary line. As he turns around, the imaginary writing he has traced with his hand now becomes manifest across the screen in concrete letters, demanding that he become Caligari: “Du musst Caligari werden” they spell for him across the sky, on the walls, and on the ground below him, as he attempts to grasp and capture the letters until the name “Caligari” begins to encircle and enclose him with ever-increasing size and he flees from them in despair. When this scene is concluded, the four readers look up slowly, aware of the gravity of what they have just read and what we have witnessed as a manifestation of their text.

The famous dilemma that *Caligari* imposes on its narrative is that the entire film is finally revealed to have originated from the imagination of an asylum’s inmate who has recounted the film as a story to a fellow inmate. The narrator, it turns out, is Francis, who has integrated the benevolent figure of the asylum director into his fictional or imaginary narrative. Much has been made of the reversal that this ending implies,<sup>29</sup> but what is hardly ever mentioned in the debates surrounding this film is the prominence and integral importance of writing throughout the film, which is consequently reduced to an account of the articulated speech by a delirious narrator. What the sequence “proves” is how Caligari and the insane director have

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. David Robinson, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (London: BFI Publishing), 1997.

become one, compelled and driven by the written demands on the screen, but this process of identification is subsequently recorded in writing and provided as visual evidence in writing on the screen. This indicates that writing throughout the film has material consequences in the sense that it provides the instances of subjectification, while at the same time, it serves as the trace of this subjectification as a record on the screen. By impelling the director to “become” Caligari, the writing on the screen enacts its own inversion of the boundaries between self and other. What we read on the screen are the expressions of the inner thought processes of the director, made manifest outwardly in abstraction as writing.

Almost to the letter, this inversion corresponds to a concise definition of Expressionist film, in which, as Lotte Eisner formulates it, “exterior facts are continually being transformed into interior elements and psychic events are exteriorized.”<sup>30</sup> In this framework, the director’s mental state is rendered as a material manifestation, in writing, on the screen. The letters thus serve as evidentiary “proof” for all to see that the director is compelled by an *idée fixe*, yet, paradoxically, it is through this very fact that the writing proves, or documents, his inner state of being that it cannot purport to possess any truth claims within the image. Ostensibly, the basis for proof can be found in the diary, the written account of the director, which, by virtue of having found its group of investigating readers, has now given rise to the image sequence, which, in turn, documents the director’s insanity. However, the image sequence as the manifestation of an act of reading does not carry with it any sense of validity yet. The readers of the diary look at each other after the sequence, as if what they have just read can prove to them the director’s obsessions and hallucinations. Yet how is this fact determined? This privileged moment of

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<sup>30</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 15.

insight stands in sharp contrast to the self-evident status of the text of the academic compendium or the diary as a confessional mode. In other words, the images of letters seen by the director, the readers, and the spectator do not correspond to a text that has been read through an act of deciphering, but instead the letters are the secondary manifestations of another text that must remain enigmatic. The writing on the screen is therefore not a depiction of what the director has written in his diaries, nor is it the visual manifestation of the particular text that the investigators are reading. It becomes instead a substitute for a moment that cannot be rendered unequivocally, either as an image or as a written text.

This moment describes the dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object. The subjective thought processes of the director now appear as objective letters, while the letters dictate to him which subject he is to become. In this process of subjectification, the voice that compels him to do so is objectified as letters in motion. On the one hand, this is a visual attempt to render internalized speech in graphic terms as the obsessive voice that is haunting the mind of the director. In this sense, the letters are merely the graphic manifestation of speech in the same manner by which intertitles indicate speech, with the added temporal dimension that makes visible the process of utterance through the movement of letters. Here, however, the voice becomes more than speech itself, because its articulation emphasizes the mechanical, and therefore non-subjective, quality of its manifestation. At first, the written letters appear in a movement that suggests a slow and gradual, even musical pace,<sup>31</sup> until this rhythmic structure is

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<sup>31</sup> In a footnote, Lotte Eisner notes the “strangely distorted ‘Expressionistic’ lettering” of the original intertitles, absent in the prints circulating at the time of her writing. But, she notes, a remnant of this expressionist technique is still evident in the “hallucination scene, when the doctor, swept along by his obsession, perceives the written phrase

abstracted to the point at which the letters are punctuated on the screen as if typed by an imaginary typewriter. The category of the typewriter suggests a machinic presence of force, the apparatus of which cannot be made visible because it stands outside the frame of the image. Nonetheless, its effects are materialized on the screen as letters that demand the director's accedence and submission to its authority. This force dictates the subjectivity the director is to inhabit and thus deprives him of his free will, a condition that has provided the basis for the director's fascination with somnambulism in the first place. He has, in turn, become the object of this fascination himself and is now reduced to an instrument of the force that haunts him.

The transition from text to image as we see in the act of reading should not, therefore, indicate that the written text on the pages is in any way more "real" or more material than the image sequences we see. In fact, a movement in the opposite direction occurs, since the distinction between text and image in this sequence is suspended and conflated into segments of seemingly equal valid forms of textual documentation until the film turns this mode of presentation into the fundamental question of the indeterminate status of the boundaries between imaginary and real manifestations throughout. In this mode of leveling, academic writing from the University of Uppsala can bestow its authority towards an equivalent textual value of the written diaries, so that the hallucination scene, in which the director "reads" the voice he hears, carries with it the same weight of significance that the ancient and dusty compendium from the venerable Swedish institution conveys. By incorporating such a wide range of written registers, the film projects a mythical idea of textual space in its juxtaposition of the lore of a Southern Italian oral folktale with its concordant clinical examination recorded by a Scandinavian

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'You must become Caligari' flashing and undulating across the narrow entrance to a garden of flat spiny trees." Cf. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, p. 21.

academic institution. In this respect, the film employs differing registers of scale that gain equal value, so that rumored tales and academic compendia can attest to the same phenomena and the written record of a madman becomes verified as fact through the images that ostensibly show an objective representation of his deluded inner state of being.

Yet, this externalized subjectivity as manifested through writing belongs itself to the framework within the overall narration, which has already been established as the spoken account of an old tale. The textual implication that these differing registers of text all belong to the voice of a narrator who, therefore, has enunciated them as writing might attest to the ease with which film as a form is capable of integrating a variety of media within it. Conversely, the use of graphic writing as an indication for the objective status of the text here might emphasize the tenuous status of the filmic text itself, which by necessity undermines its own foundations. We might dismiss these concerns as another instance through which the pervasive principles of deconstruction can be verified once more. In doing so, the film would be reduced to demonstrate, once again, that the text cannot maintain the premises it purports to uphold, were it not for the fact that this notion of a destabilizing force field interferes with the boundaries between speech and writing. That is, here we no longer have a clear-cut division between speech as a category that defines a subject and writing as its objective correlation. Instead, there is a reversal of the relation between text and reader to the point that cause and effect are no longer distinguishable categories. Writing is the consequence of the tale of Dr. Caligari, recorded in academic compendia, but this record, in turn, causes the director to become Caligari.

Friedrich Kittler has used this film in the context of his declaration that “[t]he age of media... renders indistinguishable what is human and what is machine, who is mad and who is

faking it.”<sup>32</sup> Kittler emphasizes the dissolution of boundaries at work in the film so that “the film frames the action in a way that represents not only the transvaluation of all values but also their enigmatization.”<sup>33</sup> In this process, Kittler asserts, the film imposes its technological superiority over the medium of reading, which, within the framed tale of the insane narrator, becomes a struggle between two different media. In this version of the narrative, Kittler states, the charlatan Caligari “is conquered by an order whose disruptions not coincidentally have cost the lives of a municipal office worker and a useful aesthete, two people, moreover, who are interested in books.”<sup>34</sup> However, once the framing story puts into question the authority of the narrator and the structure of order that accompanies it, the “bourgeois media love” for reading and books is rendered obsolete, “[a]s if the film attempted to uncover the pathology of a medium that entwined reading and loving but has abdicated its power to film.”<sup>35</sup> Now it is no longer possible to differentiate between charlatan and authority figure because the film has rendered them interchangeable. For Kittler it is because of film’s capacity as a recording technology that this difference can no longer be registered. “It is precisely this indistinguishability between framed and framing story, between insanity and psychiatry, that does justice to film technology,” he states.<sup>36</sup> With this impasse, the act of reading has lost its groundedness as a private act, that is, as a state of bourgeois subjectivity. Following Kittler’s argument, this would indicate that there is also no differentiation at work between acts of reading and the forms of writing that appear on

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<sup>32</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 146.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146 – 147.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



the screen. This category of dedifferentiation, however, is correct in its premise but not in the conclusion that Kittler derives from it.

While Kittler is right to emphasize the importance of indeterminacy here, he does not give the film enough credit for the extraordinary complexity with which the film insists on this process of dedifferentiation. For Kittler, the notion that “an asylum director is directed by hallucinated writings to become Caligari in the framed story is simply a film trick.”<sup>37</sup> This is an unfortunate assessment that threatens to undermine the force of his argument to understand the mediality of film and its conceptual confluence with the rise of psychiatry as an institutional discipline. Because of his focus on the discursive shifts necessitated by the technological implications of the medium film, Kittler is one of the few critics to take note of the presence of writing in the visual terrain of the cinema. However, his reductive emphasis on the deterministic effects of film as a medium obscures the significance of his observations. Indeed, Kittler reproduces a considerable segment of the writing on the screen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in order to invoke the prominence of books here: “*Somnambulism. A Compendium of the University of Uppsala. Published in the year 1726*: Thus reads the *Fraktur*-lettered title of the book that the asylum director studies in order to learn everything about a historical ‘mystic, Dr. Caligari.’”<sup>38</sup> Kittler suggests that this is an indication of seriality as a fundamental characteristic of filmic technology and therefore sees no difference between the reproduction of images and the reproductions of text within these images. Both are part of the serial machinic complicity that constitutes the medium film. In this sense, Kittler replicates the mode that he ascribes to the medium film, namely its automatic leveling of difference until the *doppelgängers* in film echo

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

their own production as they “film filming itself” and thus “demonstrate what happens to people who are in the line of fire of technological media.”<sup>39</sup> He does not, therefore, register the fundamental gaps that open up in this chain of signification when writing appears as an integral part of the image.

Instead, writing and images are flattened so that they create a hypnotic effect in their interplay. Kittler writes that Dr. Caligari, “according to the film’s subtitle, ‘under the domination of a hallucination’ reads a sentence in white letters written on the walls of the asylum: ‘YOU MUST BECOME CALIGARI.’”<sup>40</sup> This is remarkable in its inaccuracy because Kittler is, in general, very deliberate and precise in his line of reasoning. By “subtitle” Kittler presumably means intertitle and this appearance of the title suggests its status as an objective description for the images to come. Its authority as an utterance, however, is indeterminate because its presence asserts a facticity precisely at a moment when this facticity is no longer tenable. Moreover, there are several replications of this command in the sequence and the sentence variations are rendered in movement as a form of typing into the image itself and not merely as a ready-made inscription to be read “on the walls.” In fact, there are no “walls” in the image any longer, since the inscriptions manifest themselves across the image rather than on a material writing surface. Given Kittler’s investigation into the mediality of the typewriter in conjunction with the inventions of the gramophone and film, this neglect seems infelicitous, since it would underscore the focus of his argument about the machinic force through the medium of the typewriter.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> However, in defense of Kittler’s general thesis, originally published in 1986, that “media determine our situation” (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. xxxix) it should be noted that this might be more of a record of Kittler’s *memory*

writing machine here is beyond the frame of the page, so that the surface for inscriptions extends outward into the dimensions of social space itself.

In fact, Kittler explicitly links Nietzsche's conceptual philosophy to the instrument of the typewriter, since "[w]riting in Nietzsche is no longer a natural extension of humans who bring forth their voice, soul, individuality through their handwriting," but rather "humans change their position – they turn from the agency of writing to become an inscription surface."<sup>42</sup> This reversal is given an image in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. What becomes manifest on the screen, then, is a force that orders the doctor-director to inhabit another subjective position. The ultimate subjection that occurs, therefore, is that the authority figure of the doctor, reader of academic compendia, is reduced to a figure of a captive viewer before the machinic text in movement. With its emphasis on the type-written graphics of moving letters, this force "hammers" its command of becoming other onto the image and thus alludes to a moment where, as Nietzsche says, a "crude fetishism" is at work which "sees doer and deed everywhere: it believes in the will as cause in general; it believes in the 'I', in the I as Being, in the I as substance, and *projects* the belief in the I-substance onto all things – only then does it *create* the concept 'thing'."<sup>43</sup> Here the writing reverses this misapprehension and demonstrates a force that is no longer attached to individual subjects, with voice or speech as their agency. Rather this force subjects people and

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of the filmic experience. Part of the difficulty in working productively with the phenomenon of writing in film is that its appearance as a cinematic sensation does not necessarily allow for its accurate or adequate reproduction. Once film has become commodified as a storage device that allows for interactivity such as freeze-framing and instant playback on VHS-tapes or DVDs, this issue of recollection may no longer pose as much of a problem.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (1889; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 18. (Emphases in the original.)

compels them to actions *against* their will. Nowhere in the film, however, is this force grounded in any individual object or thing itself.

The fundamental discussions of the narrative frame that Kracauer initiates with his focus on the reversal are therefore misguided. Kracauer asserts that the framing story subverts the film's revolutionary potential of exposing "insane authority" that "idolizes power as such."<sup>44</sup> With the framing device, however, authority becomes benevolent again and the film conforms to a sense of submission that would indicate a German predilection towards inaction and a retreat into psychological interiority. This, for Kracauer, crystallizes the essential problem of Weimar cinema because it makes evident the reasons why revolutionary political change was not possible. With their "retreat into themselves," that is, the German nation prepares itself for an internalized "psychological revolution," as opposed to a political one, "in the depths of the collective soul,"<sup>45</sup> while fantasizing about change in authority.<sup>46</sup> The framing story, therefore, "reflects this double aspect of German life by coupling a reality in which Caligari's authority triumphs with a hallucination in which the same authority is overthrown."<sup>47</sup> The problem, however, that the film articulates lies in the difficulty of establishing the boundaries between "reality" and "hallucination" which Kracauer presumes are so self-evident. Instead, the film troubles any potential for this differentiation even more profoundly than Kracauer suggests,

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<sup>44</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* "Down to the bulk of social democratic workers they refrained from revolutionary action," while dreaming about uprising, notes Kracauer. Throughout the book, he reserves a particular sense of disappointment in the bourgeois left and a deep disdain for the political failure of the Social Democratic Party.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

because the force field of writing indicates a power that is not grounded in any recognizable institutional form of authority, be it the voice of an individual narrator, the figure of the director, or the objectified academic record of the phenomenon of its appearance. This force field becomes a figure of pure power, namely, the authority which the figure of authority obeys.

Contrary to Kracauer's claim, the film, therefore, makes visible a vast mental territory through which runs an exteriorized, ungrounded force that manifests itself in graphic letters. In this form of writing, "reality" and "hallucination" are conflated into one and the same field and the discrete terms no longer hold sway over their respective definitions. This automatic writing, then, dictates subjectivity and negates the illusion of will. In a reversal of cause and effect, Kracauer presumes the film to determine a "collective soul" that wills itself into a regression toward the comfort of inner states of being, whereas the film makes visible the vacuum in which a graphic force of writing can inscribe itself and assert authority through its figurations. Kracauer does notice this mode of figuration by calling attention to the "lettering... as an essential element of the settings" because of the "close relationship between lettering and drawing."<sup>48</sup> What his insistence on subjective interiority prevents him from articulating, however, is the fact that this figuration is not grounded in individual will or desire. This is how Kracauer describes the sequence: "In one scene the mad psychiatrist's desire to imitate Caligari materializes in jittery characters composing the words 'I must become Caligari' – words that loom before his eyes on the road, in the clouds, in the treetops."<sup>49</sup> For someone who insists on the importance of filmic

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. As with Kittler's work, this erroneous projection might be attributed to the constraints of circumstances. While Kracauer had access to the film archives of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, his book is to a significant degree a work of memory through which he reconstructs the experience of Weimar cinema in exile.

details, which, precisely because of their status as minutiae, provide the “almost imperceptible surface data” that offer the “clues to hidden mental processes,”<sup>50</sup> this error, in which “you” is substituted by “I,” is particularly remarkable.

Because of Kracauer’s reliance on the concept of an individual will for power, he misreads the sequence as inner subjective desire projected onto the screen, where it is the “I” that feels the urge to become an imitation of another person. The use of the familiar *Du* in its command suggests a force of power that is not tied to individual desire, yet Kracauer instead suggests that the writing here is still an expression of the individual’s voice. The director’s desire would merely be a projection of looming words and thus still remain an exteriorized, immobile manifestation. Furthermore, what is remarkably absent from this description is a sense of the framing within which this sequence occurs, namely the act of reading through the transitions between various registers of written texts, and the forces of movement that compel the writing to materialize at this point. What Kracauer fails to articulate here is the question of what force is at work in the materialization of writing. Since he operates under the assumption that film projects inner desires onto the screen, the writing we see on the screen can only be the expression of the director’s desire in Kracauer’s logic. But the command that dictates “you must become Caligari” as writing indicates a much more sinister structure of power because it moves so easily between and across the differing registers of writing and thus attests to its machinic mobility.

Indeed, Kracauer does acknowledge the force of this machinic mobility in a different context. In an effort that must have reminded Kracauer of the declarations of war mobilization that surfaced throughout the nation only a few years before the film’s release in February 1920, Kracauer mentions a “thorough propaganda campaign culminating in the puzzling poster ‘You

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

must become Caligari”<sup>51</sup> that was distributed across various media. This marketing campaign began in early January, weeks before the film’s premiere on February 26, when mysterious ads and posters reproduced the phrase in “large, expressionist-distorted writing” in Berlin newspapers, poster-boards and advertising pillars.<sup>52</sup> The shift in frame to include this extratextual information from the public sphere is important for Kracauer because it encapsulates the faith in the power of marketing strategies and techniques, reductively referred to by him as “propaganda,” and because it enhances the social importance of the film as an event. What may have struck Kracauer with this media strategy as well is the extension of the concept of the dissolution of boundaries once more, so that what is “real” and what belongs to the realm of cinematic illusion merge in magazine advertisements and sign posts on the street and can no longer be distinguished. Filmic elements become part of the material world; they are incorporated into the real life on the streets as writing elements that compel consumers towards mysterious ends.

Of course, Kracauer exhibits here a familiar sense of suspicion surrounding the use of advertising, which has often been imagined and vilified as a dark hypnotic force that drives consumers’ patterns of consumption beyond their scope of comprehension. But his observation does not imply that the groundbreaking marketing campaign staged by Erich Pommer and his Decla production company for the film is a crude replication of the mechanisms of hypnosis. This strategy is rather a means by which filmic writing becomes visible and legible as signs and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Siebert Praver, Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg, eds., *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/1920* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), pp. 129 – 131. (Reproductions of these advertisements are on p. 27 and p. 130.)

therefore replicates the experience of the city space as a text to be deciphered. Peter Fritzsche has called this space the “word city,” in which the sheer number of advertising texts assaults the faculty of interpretation and the “act of reading the entire city as a complete work was overwhelmed by the larger, ongoing process of just rereading and rewriting.”<sup>53</sup> As part of the process of enigmatization, the appearance of the mysterious commands that address the casual reader, potential consumer, or flâneur, belong to a textual system in which signifiers are no longer grounded by a particular meaning or require a particular reader. They form a pattern of signification in which writing has become a presence that does not address the individual as a reader. The signs solicit their commands and through their presence impose a tapestry of signifying markers that punctuate the experience of urban life as enigmatic clues that “puzzle,” to use Kracauer’s term, the inhabitant of this environment.

What this indicates is that the advertising campaign around the premiere of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* understood the writing sequence to be an emblematic moment for the experience of the film itself and therefore attempted to replicate this cinematic experience as an enigmatic element for urban perception. The central cinematic experience of city life defines the aesthetic debates of the time, when urban space becomes a textual encounter. As Anke Gleber writes, the activity of navigating urban space becomes a act of “reading,” so that “[f]lanerie as an act of deciphering the signs of exterior reality precedes in an associative and *en passant* way a latent disposition of semiotics.”<sup>54</sup> As part of this semiotic experience, advertising signs “pervade the continuum of the street with privileged signals that are legible in both verbal and pictorial ways”

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>54</sup> Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking A Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 142.



and thus “the passages and displays of everyday reality have already been read, that is experienced, by the flaneur as a text of images.”<sup>55</sup> In contrast to the authorial voice of the intertitle that declares the asylum director to be “in the grip of an obsession,” the writing that haunts him therefore, in fact, resembles the normal condition of daily experience. However, the ability to differentiate between what the signs on the street compel one to do and a concrete determination of one’s subjective desires has been effectively suspended.

The figure of the director, then, encounters writing in the same manner in which the urban flâneur will encounter the blinking and moving light advertising signs on the street, except that he cannot engage in the detached experience of writing as textuality. Despite its anachronistic setting in a 19<sup>th</sup> century fictitious Northern town named Holstenwall,<sup>56</sup> this moment is contemporary in the sense that it reinvokes and prefigures the practice of using light and electricity in advertising, a widespread practice that had been banned at the advent of World War I, but became rampant again in the postinflation period.<sup>57</sup> Already in 1898, an electric ad for Manoli tobacco was installed as a “revolving wheel of light high up on the rooftops of Berlin,” the effects of which “promptly became a Wilhelmine synonym for ‘insanity’ and the epitome of modernity’s maddening changes in human apperception.”<sup>58</sup> By 1928, the effect of the urban

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For the legendary significance of the name Holstenwall as supposedly derived from an amusement park in Hamburg and the scene of a crime that was witnessed by Hans Janowitz, one of the screenwriters, cf. Prawer, Jung, and Schatzberg, eds., *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> For an overview of light advertising on urban streets and its “electric stimulations,” cf. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

electric illuminations were such that a contemporary description of Berlin notes the “chains and streams of light... swarm all around” as “[f]iery wheels swirl, words appear letter by letter and are obliterated as if on Belshazzar’s Wall.”<sup>59</sup> Here the figure of authority already merges with the signs and obeys their commands. Power is acceded to letters and writing establishes its ultimate authority as the manifestation of a force that grounds itself in signs. What is missing is a sense of the absolute in these random prophesies of writing in light, since everyone can be a divining prophet of the city’s texts, yet what is being read is the signature of signs that only advertise their own power of signification.

Replicated on the screen, this condition seems to be the inner conflict of the director’s state of mind, but it has now been externalized as a battle between discursive registers of writing. In other words, the question the film articulates is which text can ultimately be accepted as objective and which inscription shall remain as its record. It is, then, a question of authority and where it can be located. Individual reading as an act of evaluating these different registers does not suffice because it introduces a sense of terror. When Kracauer asserts that the film in its original conception verifies the rampant guilt of an authority turned insane because it “half-intentionally stigmatized the omnipotence of a state authority manifesting itself in universal conscription and declarations of war”<sup>60</sup> by ending with the irrefutable evidence of the director’s guilt in writing, he reverses the problem of the film. In its final version, with the framing device that relativizes the objective faith in the narrative, the film outlines the conditions under which the conflict over authority becomes evident. State authority enters the picture because it manifests itself as the only force omnipotent enough to stand outside the hallucination versus

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 64.

reality dichotomy. It is the absence of arbitration by a benevolent authority that disturbs the film's faith – and Kracauer's – in specific writing as the final record of objectivity. The place where power can be located is now a technological matter of inscription to which everyone, including the highest figures of authority, is subjected. In this respect, the film prepares the grounds for a conflict over the modes of signification which demand a different kind of recipient. The ultimate reader of the various levels of writing is not the film's spectator, who is forced to relegate the quandary of interpretive decision to the film itself. In the fusion of the film with itself as the machinic figuration of meaning, the image itself becomes the highest authority that can allow this condition to occur.

The film makes visible that its radical ambiguity extends even to academic and legal inscriptions, which can no longer be trusted on face value because they are no longer grounded by a correlation to objective truth. In doing so, the film outlines a terrain that points to the absence of traditional figures of authority and thus necessitates a submission to the technology that can arbitrate the forces of writing. For a social environment such as Germany in 1919, in which questions of legitimacy of the state system were of the utmost importance, this provides a crucial correlation for the film's shift toward the narrative structures of the folk-tale and the parable. Like the battles that were fought on the streets of Berlin over the political structures of the state that would come to be known as the Weimar Republic, the conflict between competing systems of authority is invoked in the film's formal structure. But this conflict is transferred back onto a reactionary, outdated narrative structure, against which the machinic forces of writing manifest themselves. The film thus allegorizes a struggle over systems of government; that is, the legitimacy of the body that will constitute the final arbiter of the law and implement its enforcement through writing. It may create the sensation of an embattled subjectivity, a retreat

into the “shell” of the individual, in Kracauer’s phrase, but this sensation may only be the response of a shell-shocked spectator who witnesses the battle over the final legitimacy of authority spelled out in letters on the screen. Written on the screen is the command to witness what happens when the agents of authority are no longer capable of exerting it. In this respect, it is a visual correlation to the oath, a performative act that testifies to the solemn intentions of the speaker.<sup>61</sup>

The crisis of legitimacy that is enacted in the systems of writing on the screen as an issue of authority closely follows Agamben’s discussion of the differing foundations of power, namely *auctoritas* and *potestas*.<sup>62</sup> Agamben links the attempts to define the ultimate locus of power through either one of these concepts to a philosophical crisis that “seems to run into almost insurmountable obstacles and aporias.”<sup>63</sup> As Agamben explains, the Roman concept of *auctoritas* functioned in private law “in order to confer legal validity on the act of a subject who cannot independently bring a legally valid act into being.”<sup>64</sup> As a concept this notion of a transference of power is still present in the form of authorization, but Agamben emphasizes the implied category that *auctoritas* determines a relation in which by law “there must be a relationship between two elements (or two subjects): one endowed with *auctoritas* and one that takes initiative in the act in the strict sense.”<sup>65</sup> As he continues, these subjects can “coincide” in one person or element, but “if there is a gap or incongruity between them, the act must be

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<sup>61</sup> For an extended discussion of this concept of witnessing, see Chapter 4.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, “*Auctoritas* and *Potestas*,” in *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

completed with *auctoritas* in order to be valid.”<sup>66</sup> He notes that this is not an act of representation but rather the result from the condition of propriety as the physical right of a person.

In this condition, however, there is a moment of transference which establishes *auctoritas*, which Agamben locates in the linguistic shift to *auctor fio*, that is, the subjectification of power through a passive construction as “I am made *auctor*,” rather than the active declaration of being as *actor sum* (“I am auctor”).<sup>67</sup> This moment of reversal that confers impersonal power is where the aporia lies, since it defines a “power that suspends or reactivates law, but is not formally in force as law.”<sup>68</sup> Agamben specifically connects this to a paradoxical moment of invalidation, or as he puts it, a relation that is “at once antagonistic and supplementary.”<sup>69</sup> In Agamben’s description, this manifests itself as an exceptional condition where “*auctoritas*... appears in its purest and most pernicious form when it has been invalidated..., when it lives as mere writing in absolute opposition to the law’s being in force.”<sup>70</sup> Agamben notes the affinity here to a Benjaminian category of allegory as the essential condition where a “power that can at once ‘grant legitimacy’ and suspend law exhibits its most proper character at the point of its greatest legal inefficacy.”<sup>71</sup>

Agamben also highlights the rediscovery in treaties on legal philosophy of the category of *auctoritas* as a foundational condition for conceptions of the state in the 1920s as an indication how this philosophy “kept pace with the growing weight that the authoritarian principle was

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

assuming in the political life of European societies.”<sup>72</sup> But what is remarkable in this respect is that the philosophical aporia as a fundamental condition for the legitimacy of authority has already found its image on the screen. The moment at which writing in film appears, then, allegorizes this conceptual bind of power and authority and extends it to another condition that Agamben links to this crisis and which was invoked by the power vested to Augustus by the Roman magistrates. “The ‘august’ life,” Agamben notes, “can no longer be defined through the opposition of public and private.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, this opposition is invalidated in the figure of the sovereign, who “expresses an *auctoritas* in his very person, only because in ‘august’ life public and private have entered into a zone of absolute indistinction.”<sup>74</sup> This embodiment of authority is linked to a suspension of the distinction between public and private, a condition that could be extended to the moment of writing on the screen, which implores the spectator to bear witness to the suffering of authority and thus makes the physical experience of the loss of power a public spectacle, yet one which is borne out in private in the seats of the movie theater. In this figuration, Michel Foucault’s admonition on the operations of power is confirmed. As Foucault argues, the exercise of sovereignty is not invisible or obscured within a social matrix, since it is “exercised... by virtue of [a] heterogeneity between a public right of sovereignty and a polymorphous disciplinary mechanism.”<sup>75</sup>

This would also help explain the apparent contradiction between writing as a figure of authority and its expression as a machinic force of delusion. It appears the most powerful at the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 – 1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 106.

moment when it is merely an expression of individual madness, but the condition of this delusion is extended to the spectator as a reader of signs who is forced to experience the condition of insanity rendered as an objective state of being. In this allegorical struggle, writing is, in a variation of Agamben's description, "what remains of law if law is wholly suspended."<sup>76</sup> Kracauer's sense that the film expressed a subversive commentary on the delusions of an "unlimited authority that idolizes power as such"<sup>77</sup> is therefore not necessarily misguided. But it is the shock with which these empty delusions are spelled out on the screen that allegorizes the connection established by Kracauer between Caligari and a figure like Hitler. However, it is not on the narrative level of the coda sequence, which revalidates authority by erasing the significance of what has become before, through which this connection is established. Rather, the writing on the screen spells out the fundamental fiction on which authority is based, yet by fusing the deranged figure of authority with the figure of the law in writing, the film replicates the effect of what Agamben calls "the ideology or a *fictio* intended to ground the preeminence of *auctoritas* in relation to *potestas* thus becomes a figure of law's immanence to life."<sup>78</sup> Under these conditions, the physical authority of the person becomes the originary source of power in the moments when the structural systems of law are no longer effective, a situation, as Agamben reminds us, that happened "precisely in the years when the authoritarian principle saw an unexpected rebirth in Europe through fascism and National Socialism."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 80.

<sup>77</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 65.

<sup>78</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 84.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Georg Wilhelm Pabst's 1931 early sound film *Kameradschaft* ends with a disturbing coda that, according to Pabst's own accounts almost three decades later, was never viewed by the public, but which extends this battle over paradoxical conceptions of power into a different mode and allegorizes the failure of writing as a legal fiction. Pabst recounts that the film's narrative, which celebrates the heroic efforts by German coal miners to rescue their French counterparts buried underground, concludes with a moment of avowed sentimentality, an expression of "hope that a friendship forged in the face of adversity will endure."<sup>80</sup> Following this moment of hope, a scene depicting the reconstitution of the borders that separate the French from the German mining shafts shifts the film's jubilation to an ominous note. According to Pabst, audiences never witnessed this ending because, to his knowledge, there "was not one movie theater screening the film that did not simply decide to edit out the final part" and he paraphrases the theater management's responses as such: "Sure, when the workers are orating, there is applause; but, once the ending is added, why, then all the people go home depressed!"<sup>81</sup> Most contemporary reviews, even ones written several weeks after the film's opening night, refer explicitly to the final scene and the prints in circulation at the time contained the ending, but versions without the coda were apparently shown in some theaters in the following months, including the Capitol Berlin, the film's premier theater, where the ending was removed from the print a day after the opening.<sup>82</sup> When the production company submitted the film to be classified officially as

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<sup>80</sup> Georg Wilhelm Pabst, "Über zwei meiner Filme," *Filmkunst: Zeitschrift für Filmkultur und Filmwissenschaft* (1960): 21 – 24. Available online at Deutsches Filminstitut <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/dt2tp0044e.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> For the reception of the film and an evaluation of the reviews, see Hermann Barth, *Psychagogische Strategien des filmischen Diskurses in G.W. Pabsts Kameradschaft* (Munich: diskurs film Bibliothek, 1990), p. 192 and pp. 199 – 215.



“educational,” it did so without the ending because, in the words of the evaluatory board, the educational certificate could only be awarded “once the confusion and incoherence of the final ending had been removed.”<sup>83</sup> Siegfried Kracauer calls the film’s conclusion an “acid epilogue,” in which “Versailles wins out” once again and the “victory of bureaucratic wisdom” is thus satirized.<sup>84</sup> In his review of the premiere, the influential critic Herbert Ihering bemoans the removal of the ending as a “severe detriment” because the coda provides a contrast to the film which would otherwise end in the “cheap pathos of reconciliation,” but then notes that he has already been informed of the decision to reinstate the original ending.<sup>85</sup>

This debate over the necessity and the function of the ending already indicates the contested status of the film’s political and ideological allegiances, an issue that would later apply to the biography of Pabst himself, but what Pabst identifies here as a mere issue of the emotional dispositions of the film’s theater audiences becomes a problem of formal signification that manifests itself in the larger problem of *how* to conclude the film. In other words, the very argument surrounding the question of what shape the film’s definitive form should take attests to a fundamental ambivalence in its direction or movement, which the film attempts to overcome by various strategic means. According to the film’s critics, these strategies either do not succeed

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 217 – 218. (Translation mine.) The original decision of the *Bildstelle des Zentralinstituts für Erziehung und Unterricht* as quoted here states that “[i]n dieser ... Fassung wird die Grenze wieder aufgerichtet, und deutsche und französische Beamte unterzeichnen ein Protokoll darüber. Wegen dieser Unklarheit konnte die Anerkennungskarte der Bildstelle erst ausgestellt werden, nachdem die Unstimmigkeit beseitigt war.”

<sup>84</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 240.

<sup>85</sup> Herbert Ihering review in *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, November 19, 1931, quoted in Barth, *Psychagogische Strategien des filmischen Diskurses*, p. 192.

in conforming to the inherent logic generated by the narrative or they are questioned in terms of the efficacy in their designs to solicit appropriate affective responses on the part of the audience.

Either position, however, assumes that the removal or inclusion of the film's original ending is sufficient in and of itself to reframe and determine the meaning of the film as a closed system. But, as I want to demonstrate, the process of framing a conclusion to the film begins much earlier and this process serves as an attempt to arrest a movement that the film itself generates. That is, instead of locating a problematic within the ideological content of *Kameradschaft* or of speculating on how the reception by actual or postulated audiences can be controlled, I want to shift the focus towards the question of how the film enacts its successive instances of framing and how it ultimately concludes this process. What the film achieves is to bring into relief the problem of how its mode of expression allegorizes its own predicament of control. It does so by emphasizing and making explicit its recourse to allegory and can therefore illuminate the necessity of understanding this concept as a fundamental aspect of signification for German film in general instead of dismissing it as a secondary effect of the spectator's belated desire for hermeneutic textual coherence.

*Kameradschaft* ("Comradeship")<sup>86</sup> takes its premise from actual events that took place in Courrières in the Pas-de-Calais region of Northwest France in March 1906, and transposes them

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<sup>86</sup> The term is equivalent to the English word "comradeship," but, in the context of the film, the title also refers to the mining nomenclature "Kameradschaft" as a technical designation for the entire crew, unit or mining detail employed in a colliery. Cf. Hermann Barth, Helga Belach, et al., eds., *Kameradschaft / La tragédie de la mine: Drehbuch von Ladislaus Vajda, Karl Otten, Peter Martin Lampel nach einer Idee von Karl Otten zu G.W. Pabsts Film von 1931* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1997), p. 25, footnote 17.

into the present of the 1930s.<sup>87</sup> The Courrières colliery catastrophe, one of the worst disasters in the history of mining, exacted 1,100 lives and necessitated arduous salvage operations that lasted for several weeks. On March 12, 1906, two days after the network of pits had been devastated by a huge underground explosion, a crew of German rescue workers arrived from the colliery *Hibernia* in Gelsenkirchen, a mining town in the Western German industrial region *Ruhrgebiet*, approximately 200 miles away. While this team was “particularly adept at undertaking rescue operations in burning mines” and the German miners’ arrival signaled the compassion and concern of the international community, their contribution, unfortunately, was limited to the removal of bodies.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, the presence of these specialists “did much to restore confidence” and “led to a temporary reduction” of Franco-German political tensions.<sup>89</sup>

Pabst’s film fictionalized these events and turned them into a rescue mission of recovery, in which the German mining crew locates their French counterparts and brings them safely to the

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<sup>87</sup> This shift in temporal registers is not necessarily self-evident in the film. Indeed, in the recollections from 1960 cited above, Pabst himself speaks of the film’s “European” perspective, i.e., “first and foremost... the French-German relations,” and declares that, since the state of these relations “was equally important in 1929, 1930 as it is today,” he and the screenwriter Karl Otten decided to “adjust the events of the case by 13 years, that is to 1919.” Cf. G. W. Pabst, “Über zwei meiner Filme.” However, as Hermann Barth points out, “the error in comprehension that *Kameradschaft* takes place in 1919 and not in 1931 is rampant in film historiography,” an error Pabst succumbs to in his own recollection as well. Barth cites three reference points in the film’s dialogue that would date the diegetic time to the 1930s, namely the allusions to the French occupation of the Ruhr area from 1923 to 1925, to the high unemployment rates in 1930, and to the emergency decrees of Chancellor Brüning. Cf. Hermann Barth, Helga Belach, et al., eds. *Kameradschaft*, p. 25, footnote 18.

<sup>88</sup> Robert G. Neville, “The Courrières Colliery Disaster, 1906,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 1 (January 1978): 37 – 38.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

surface. Pabst emphasized the contemporaneity of this historical moment of working-class solidarity prior to World War I, so that it could be extended to the present by concluding with triumphant festivities of fraternization between the French and German miners. However, this celebration of international understanding is qualified by a sinister transition from the events above to the restored mineshafts below. With the joyful music lingering on the soundtrack, a slow fade-in opens to a medium close-up of the words *Frontière 1919* in stark white block letters. Below this inscription, two border guards, one German and one French, look at each other solemnly through metal bars as if they are looking at their own mirror image. The next shot reemphasizes the visual reciprocity staged in the image sequence. Two bricklayers on either side of the bars are positioned at the feet of the guards. They are smoothing over the final touches on the cement foundation which holds the bars of the border and then get up to leave with their equipment. Positioned this time on the reverse side, the camera pulls back to reveal a German guard standing in the exact position and in similarly rigid posture as his French counterpart. Above him, etched into stone in gothic typeface, the words *Grenze 1919* are visible.

The boundary that is restored in the final sequence here constitutes the dividing line between the French and the German mineshafts. The aperture, the closure of which the last scene depicts, was created at a moment in the film when such divisions into national categories were an impediment to the naked survival of the miners underground and therefore underscores the arbitrariness of these categories. In this sense, Kracauer is right to attribute a satirical level of meaning to this sequence because it emphasizes a populist notion that national boundaries are not only artificially drawn, but rather indicative of a petty bureaucratic sense of propriety and protocol, which in its myopic emphasis on order fails to see its own limitations. Moreover, this

desire for order, ironically, transcends specifically “national” stereotypes because it unites the French and German official in their celebration of order restored.

Kracauer sees the symmetry of the composition as having a satirical effect, because it not only accentuates the limitations of a legalistic frame of mind, but also because it subtly highlights the inexorable collusion between capitalism and nationalism. Furthermore, since the ending was also frequently misunderstood as a critique of the Treaty of Versailles, Kracauer attributes the failure of the film to communicate unequivocally its symbolism to Pabst’s “unfamiliarity with symbolic language.”<sup>90</sup> While this is a nod on Kracauer’s part to affirm Pabst’s allegiance to a kind of realism and objectivity in his films that do not need to resort to a crude form of symbolist fancy, there is, however, an added dimension in the irony of the repeated gesture between the two officials. In the mirroring of the two sides of the border, the framing of the image resembles a screen for both sides, through which the camera travels by aligning itself freely on either side of the officials’ perspectives.

In this composition, therefore, the screen itself has become a mirror and we witness two officials recognizing their shared duty as the mirror images of each other. This may be an instance of what Gilles Deleuze, in reformulating a term borrowed from C.S. Peirce, explains as a *dicisign*, which “refers to a perception of perception” and which “usually appears in cinema when the camera ‘sees’ a character who is seeing; it implies a firm frame and so constitutes a kind of solid state of perception.”<sup>91</sup> This moment of “cementing” the frame is repeated as a literalization of the image, since we see a boundary being reconstituted and solidified by an act

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<sup>90</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 241.

<sup>91</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 32.

of mutual perception of the guard's mirror-image. At the same time, the image itself is mirrored in a writing which is not merely referential, that is, as Kracauer would say, a "symbolic language," but rather self-referential in the sense that it both expresses its own limitation and it demarcates a limit point as the image of a limit.

This insistence on the finality of a definitive meaning as a mode of demarcation through writing is evident from the outset of *Kameradschaft*, which appeals to notions of power and truth by establishing its credentials through the written word. After the title of the film *Kameradschaft* is presented in a title,<sup>92</sup> the film offers a dedication "to the miners of the world." With this proclamation the film offers itself up as a gift of consecration, but it is not yet clear from this beginning within what contextual framework this act of dedication occurs. The event of a dedication usually functions as an act of memory and celebration, but since this title is followed by another, lengthier title, which declares that "the story of 'Kameradschaft' is founded on fact and takes place in the coalmines by the frontiers of France and Germany," the respect that a dedication lays out to the addressee is qualified by the subsequent titular remarks. The factual foundation is explained in lengthy titles explaining the historical background that provides the basis for the film. In the act of reading these explanations, the proposed viewer as postulated in the address of the writing on the screen consents to accept the premise that the film will serve as a dedication, while at the same time the writing promises that the film will define for the viewer the terms within which the plight of the miners of the world will be developed.

Through the act of dedication and the factual situation that provides the basis for the film the initial writing, therefore, evokes the question of audience on both an implicit and a

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<sup>92</sup> Here "title" refers to the technical term that indicates an insert between the flow of the image track, akin to an *intertitle*, and unlike a *subtitle*, which denotes writing that is superimposed onto the image track.

theoretical level. In its act of dedication, the film presents itself to “the miners of the world” and, through such a gesture, envisages an international, if not global, audience comprised of workers who will see themselves portrayed as workers on the screen. Addressed as the recipients of this film, miners thus become the “implied” audience as stated by the intertitle. Nonetheless, the tribute also indicates a political position that the film proposes and imposes. In the act of dedicating the film to the miners, any potential or actual audiences are addressed as witnesses who, through the act of seeing the film, will provide a testimonial verification of what it means to be a miner and what the consequences of this notion of identity will be. The writing that initiates the film is thus linked to the question of identity from the outset. Moreover, given that the cinema functions as a mass medium, the film speaks to the masses by articulating itself as a means of differentiating a group within the mass of audiences into a distinct category of identity.

This notion of identity through differentiation is what allows Russell Berman to posit the structural and textual “ambiguity” of *Kameradschaft*. He locates a mode of signification that through “the very manner with which the film attempts to assert its message of solidarity turns out to demonstrate its instability.”<sup>93</sup> This process, Berman establishes, results in a futile appeal to a utopian community, futile precisely because the film displaces its own terms of argument “into another terrain of struggle,” while leaving the structure of difference in place.<sup>94</sup> According to Berman, the film, therefore, ontologizes the process of “struggle and mastery”<sup>95</sup> which defines the proletarian community by insisting on a homosocial force that radically excludes women and

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<sup>93</sup> Russell A. Berman, “A Solidarity of Repression: *Kameradschaft* (1931),” in *The Films of G.W. Pabst: An Extraterritorial Cinema*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 116 – 117.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

does not see its own repressive complicity in this construction of sexual identity and difference. Moreover, in this notion of a proletarian community, “solidarity appears to be a version of crowd control,” in which, in an act of “self-negation,” the “mass is turned against the mass” and thus, ultimately, the utopian rhetoric of the film is undermined “by the discipline of a male socialism that arrives just in time to save the capitalist organization.”<sup>96</sup> As a result, Berman concludes, the film fails to resolve the problematics it has set out to overcome and thus serves as a paradigmatic instance of the feeble rhetoric of a naïve internationalism.

The importance of Berman’s analysis of this failure lies in his understanding of the film as a process or movement, since it becomes “crucial to pay close attention to the nature of the social bonds represented in the *course* of the film and not only to the terms of the social contract announced at its conclusion.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, in his assessment of the cinematic text, Berman hints at the relation between the film’s conclusion and the forces it has set in motion throughout its duration. Within this process of movement *Kameradschaft* oscillates between two limit points, determined by the film’s celebration of instrumental technology – both in thematic terms as a technological struggle and in formal terms as a sound film – and by the rhetorical enunciation in speech of a unity beyond particular languages. Either of these limit points, however, converges around the question of how boundaries can be framed and determined. The film indeed exhibits an intense “anxiety about borders,”<sup>98</sup> because, once established boundaries are obliterated, “the organization of space goes out of control, and in both cases – in the formal construction of the film and in the content of the narrative – the answer to the crisis is

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 118. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 122.



technological progress.”<sup>99</sup> But in his focus on the spatial configurations that the dissolution of boundaries opens up, Berman no longer considers the film’s larger trajectories of movement along which the chain of signification travels. Instead, he decides to put aside the category of movement that he has invoked for the significance of the film and now reontologizes the textual construction as postulated by the film in terms of an ideological resolution to the contradictory situation the film poses, rather than continuing to examine the film as a durational event unfolding in movement.

In this respect, Berman can be said to describe a process of reterritorialization at work in the film. In the subterranean space of the mines, national boundaries are obsolete in the sense that they no longer perform any useful function and have become an impediment to the subjugation of nature. Within this space, an international brotherhood of solidarity should become possible. But this reorganization of the territory of the mines through the instance of the dissolution of boundaries imposes a new set of “libidinal repression,”<sup>100</sup> which the film circumvents by framing the miners’ struggle as a technological fight against nature. In this struggle, they are united as a brotherhood beyond the limitations of national identity. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explicitly link such a process of redefinition to the intricate question of the mechanistics of language as a “machinic assemblage,” where “content” and “expression” of “bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another” are placed alongside an axis with a “collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies.”<sup>101</sup> What Berman suggests but does not quite articulate, then, is the issue of how the category of individual identity in *Kameradschaft* cannot be separated from the problem of its configuration within a larger collective. The shifts of displacement function here as a form of enunciation that attempts to delineate, or, more precisely, redefine the limits within which the social body that has already been assembled underground as a collective can be articulated once again. But this problem of temporal repetition forms part of the film’s larger project as a fundamental question and Berman’s way of framing it as a territorial shift in which the text ultimately negates and cancels out the force of its own ideological or political desire obscures its status as a question of movement.

Because of this, however, it would make sense that the concluding sequence, which comes before the epilogue of the reinstitution of the borderlines, figures so prominently in Berman’s argument. In a jubilant ceremony at the border, the two groups of miners convene and embrace each other under the banners of the French *tricolore* and the Weimar Republic German flag. A jovial, plump German miner, Wilderer, searches out his newfound friends in the crowd with the words “where is the arch-enemy? Where is the arch-enemy?” and then kisses and embraces the young French boy with whom he had been trapped by exclaiming “there you are, my little arch-enemy!”<sup>102</sup> Amid the cacophony, music and chants of hooray, the French foreman

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<sup>101</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> In the original “Wo ist der Erzfeind? Wo ist der Erzfeind? Wo ist der Erzfeind? Da bist du ja, mein Erzfeindchen!” This affectionate catachresis echoes the incongruity between friendship and comradeship, which are, as Chris Hedges points out, often erroneously equated: “Comradeship,” Hedges writes, is “often mistaken for friendship, but is in fact the very opposite” and he cites a study on warrior culture which concludes that “the essential difference between friendship and comradeship is that friendship creates ‘a heightened awareness of the

Jean begins to orate from the flatbed of a truck down to the crowd below, to offer his gratitude and to extol the importance of unity: “Here we are all miners together, and it is because we all are miners together that you came and brought us back to the surface ... And because the borders are behind us, there are but two enemies left for us - gas and war!”<sup>103</sup> Berman considers the rhetoric of this speech “sloganeering,” because it is based on the assumption that the “public language of political leaders” suffices to “articulate a collective identity.”<sup>104</sup> The limitation of this interpretation lies in its implicit connection to a kind of speech-act theory, where the public declarations are understood to serve as a performative utterance that, in and of itself, defines the community. Because the film also articulates its own ideological limits, this faith in the constitutive power of speech is obviously misguided and must therefore fail to achieve its promises because it cannot be maintained beyond the moment of its utterance. This critique, however, fails to address the real dilemma of the sequence because it focuses on the rhetoric of the moment and is therefore a static element within the larger textual movements of the film.

The problem here goes beyond the rhetorical dimension to the very concept of language itself, which the film attempts to articulate meticulously. This linguistic frame is rendered in

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self,’ while comradeship is predicated on ‘the suppression of self awareness.’” Cf. Chris Hedges, *What Every Person Should Know About War* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 119.

<sup>103</sup> The full speech in the original French is as follows: “Camarades! On est là tous mineurs ensemble. Et c’est par ce qu’ on est tous mineurs ensemble que tu m’a remonté du fond. Et c’est toujours par ce qu’on est tous mineurs ensemble que le camarade Kasper a fait sauter les barreaux de la grille à treize-cent-quinze. Et c’est aussi par ce que derrière notre frontière à nous il n’ y a que deux ennemis: le gaz et la guerre! Là, je vous dis, il faut jamais oublier ça: on est tous mineurs ensemble! Merci, camarades! On ne vous dit pas ‘adieu’, mais ‘au revoir’! Auf Wiedersehen! Auf Wiedersehen! Auf Wiedersehen!”

<sup>104</sup> Russell Berman, “A Solidarity of Repression,” p. 117.

visual terms, as the progressive chain of figuration in which this sequence is embedded, as well as in the acoustic dilemma of a speech that may fail to find recipients beyond its moment of articulation. As Berman points out, “speech, to which the film ascribes the power to assert the identity of comradeship, turns out to be inadequate,” if not contradictory, because it is followed by a speech “insisting on the limits of speech.”<sup>105</sup> Wittkopp, the German counterpart to the French foreman and the one who initiated the spontaneous organization of the rescue operations, feels compelled to respond to the speech, the language of which he did not understand: “Comrades, what the French comrade said, I did not understand. But what he *meant*, that we all understood.”<sup>106</sup> In Berman's interpretation, speech here is rendered as “secondary... vis-à-vis a more effective mode of expression – *meinen* rather than *sagen* – and the construction of the collective is thereby shifted from rational communication to an irrational domain of opinion and non-verbal semiosis.”<sup>107</sup> For an early sound film, this is a remarkable qualification, especially given that, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated, the status of speech is always privileged as

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> The full speech in the original German is as follows: “Kameraden! Was der französische Kamerad gesagt hat, hab' ich nicht verstehen können. Aber was er gemeint hat, haben wir alle verstanden. Weil es egal ist, ob Deutscher oder Franzose, Arbeiter sind wir alle! Und Kumpel ist Kumpel. Wir halten zusammen, denn wir gehören zusammen. Die französischen Kameraden sollen leben! Glück auf!” This scene echoes a previous scene in which the manager of the German mine informs his colleague in France via telephone about the impending arrival of the rescuers and takes credit for instigating the operation. Berman mentions that the telephone as a technological instrument is used by the management of the German mine to inform his French counterpart, but neglects to add that this conversation takes place in French and does not draw out the implication that the capitalist management is already unified by technology and that, moreover, they do not encounter “speech” as an impediment to communication.

<sup>107</sup> Berman, p. 117.

primary in relation to *writing*,<sup>108</sup> but Berman introduces a categorical division within this problematic of primacy and immediacy between irrational “opinion” and “non-verbal semiosis.”

This means that the speeches that seem to conclude the film articulate a limit point where words no longer suffice and a different register needs to be evoked. Berman separates this into rational speech and irrational meaning, but the term that resonates in Wittkopp’s use of the word *meinen* is not merely “opinion,” which is what Berman seems to understand it to be, but rather the more fundamental definition of *meinen* as a verb indicating *intention*. The film, therefore, enacts the very problem of the limits of speech and language and thus necessitates a coda that spells out the implications of the inadequacy of speech, because in the potential capacities of sound, language enters as a problem in the determination of the limits of meaning. In opposition to Pabst’s own later recollection, this coda or qualification is not demanded by affect – because it would somehow “depress the workers” or give them hope – but rather draws the affective dimension of intention to its logical consequence. Spoken language, therefore, is inadequate to convey meaning and intention. Because the film embraces the technology of sound to such a degree, Berman says, it both “prefigures the use of sound in propaganda” and the subsequent reliance on the radio in Nazi Germany and he bemoans the demise of an “older media culture” in

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 29: “This determination is by rights anterior to all the eventual differentiations that could arise within the systems of terminology.... [and] it would have to be admitted that the immediate and privileged unity which founds significance and the acts of language is the articulated unity of sound and sense within the phonie.” Derrida continues, “[w]ith regard to this unity, writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic.”

which a “verbal literacy – individual reading in a private sphere – belongs to an increasingly distant past.”<sup>109</sup>

This ambivalent relation of culture and technology, in fact, characterizes Pabst’s own wavering position towards the medium sound. In an article from 1929 entitled “The Reality of the Sound Film,” Pabst declared enthusiastically that, after his erstwhile skepticism of the intrusion of sound into the coherence of the filmic image, he now saw the potential of the sound film as a promise towards a “world language”<sup>110</sup> and embraced its “perfect reality.”<sup>111</sup> As Pabst writes, “the silent film has its boundaries, ... it is impeded by the primitivism of the impulses prior to the word, impeded by the unequivocalness of the merely visible.”<sup>112</sup> But, in an illustration of what Wolfgang Jacobsen calls Pabst’s rapid responses shifting between rejected and reconstituted allegiances in a complicated world, which ultimately render him a tragic figure as a “torn individual, a conservative avant-gardist,”<sup>113</sup> Pabst wrote a contrarian assessment eight years later. In 1937 in “Le rôle intellectuel du Cinéma,” Pabst declared that “despite the rise of the sound film, I am convinced that text itself in film is of marginal relevance, [because] what counts is the impression of the image.”<sup>114</sup> This fundamental ambivalence, coming after an initial

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<sup>109</sup> Berman, p. 124.

<sup>110</sup> G.W. Pabst, “Realität des Tonfilms,” in *Film-Kurier*, June 1, 1929, reprinted in *G.W. Pabst*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1997), p. 127.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* In the original: “Aber der stumme Film hat Grenzen. ... [S]o ist der stumme Film durch die Primitivität der vor den Worten liegenden Regungen, die Eindeutigkeit des nur Sehbaren gehemmt.”

<sup>113</sup> Wolfgang Jacobsen, “Ein konservativer Avantgardist. Ein Vorwort,” in *G.W. Pabst*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> As cited in Günter Krenn, “Meister im Zwielficht – Betrachtungen zu vier Literaturverfilmungen von G.W. Pabst,” in *Geheimnisvolle Tiefe: G. W. Pabst*, ed. Filmarchiv Austria (Vienna: Filmarchiv Austria, 1998), p. 32.

reluctance but then the enthusiastic embrace of the new technology, which Pabst sees at first as a new potential but later comes to think of as a threat to the image, is registered by Berman in *Kameradschaft* already.

Within the division that yields sound as the innovative technology but produces a concomitant decline of literacy into the white noise of the “irrational domain of opinion,” Berman locates the failure of the film’s intention and echoes a reactionary understanding of the function of mass media as part of a technology that comprises an obstacle to reasonable communication, which presumably is the domain of the bourgeois reader of print media. To counter to this assessment, a shift away from Berman’s suggestion of the limitations of sound toward the attempted movements of signification at work in the film is necessary. If the inadequacy of speeches necessitates the coda in which solidified writing takes precedence over the moment of elation and defines the possibility of reframing boundaries, we need to follow a corresponding movement backwards into the domain of signification by noise and then further back to the level of signification that adheres to that of the silent cinema. The sequence that precedes the final moment of celebration dramatizes the use of noise and the technology of sound as well. While a group of French and German miners is trapped in the locomotive chamber and they are resigned to await their death together, the telephone miraculously rings and a German miner answers the call of a French worker who has been instructed not to give up and call the various connections for the telephone lines down below in the shafts. When the German miner finally answers, his voice is enough and there is no need to communicate beyond the noise that indicates another human being. The voice on the other end of the line indicates the presence of bodies in the locomotive chamber and this moment of triumph is punctuated by bilingual cries back and forth of “hallo! hallo!” and “allô? allô?” until all of the Germans yell “Oui! Oui! Oui!

Oui!” into the speaker. The relief lies in the connection itself, because what matters here is pure sound, albeit transmitted, rather than speech and the shift to a different linguistic register is instinctive rather than acquired, belonging more to an automatic glossolalia of affirmation and jubilation in which the Germans can now speak. Their collective voice affirms itself through technology and signals its presence over a territorial distance that suddenly no longer constitutes a threat.

This distance bridged by the technology of the telephone and the presence of a connection then is similarly amplified by the knocking sounds produced when the miners trapped in the locomotive chamber bang on the pipes to signal their location to the communal rescue team who begins to return the signals. In an increasingly frenzied cacophony of drumming on pipes, the noise of the rescue signals merges with the relieved communal laughter and screams of the trapped miners to become a communal expression of shared relief and hope. This sound carries over through a fade-out into black which then reveals a newspaper headline of the “latest mining disaster news” to announce that the “German rescuers will leave the hospital on Sunday.”<sup>115</sup> As the headlines linger on the screen a lengthy sound-bridge of celebratory marching music begins to connect the newspaper writing to the subsequent scene of the festivities along the border that will constitute the penultimate closing sequence described above.

The transition therefore emphasizes the connection between the celebratory speeches at the border and the unbridled screams of relief earlier through the newspaper headlines, which, seen in its transitory function here, already serves to indicate the divergence between the scene before and what the writing in the headlines necessarily obfuscates, namely the physical

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<sup>115</sup> In the original: “Dernières nouvelles de la catastrophe minière: les sauveteurs allemands sortiront de l’hôpital dimanche.”



connection between the saved bodies and the immediacy of sound. Conversely, this rescue scene, in which the telephone and sound serve as the prerequisite basis for the final speeches, is itself prefigured by a sequence in which a fundamental misunderstanding on the level of pure images occurs. This famous sequence comes just a few minutes before the rescue by telephone and it involves the two speakers of the celebration. A lone French miner, Jean, bangs a pipe with his wrench, at first desperately, then increasingly slower and with a resigned acceptance of the futility of the gesture. A single German rescuer, Wittkopp, covered in a gas mask, hears the noise and follows it toward its source, while repeatedly screaming a muffled “hallo?” and “is there someone?” through his mask.<sup>116</sup> When the French miner sees him in his gasmask from afar he mutters in horror “les Allemands” and bangs on the pipe in desperation, louder and faster as the German figure approaches him.

His incessant banging accompanies a close-up of the masked face when the sound of the rhythmic clanging, reminiscent at this point already of the fire of a machine gun, yields to explosions. With this sonar cue the film flashes back to Jean in his uniform as he stares traumatized at the carnage unfolding before his eyes and suddenly finds himself locked in hand-to-hand combat with a German soldier wearing a gasmask. They struggle desperately in the

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<sup>116</sup> The muffled cries in the original of “Hallo?” and “Ist wer da?” might serve as a complement to the argument Berman presents when he examines the ambiguity of sound in the film: When the fiancée of one of the miners hitchhikes back to the mines, she is picked up by a nun who asks her if she has relatives in the mine. She hesitantly replies, “mon frère et son ami.” Berman makes productive use of the homology of the phoneme “son” as a possessive pronoun and a noun to extrapolate the importance of “son, ami” or “friend sound” for the film. Cf. Berman, p. 123. Similarly here, then, in this framework, a layer of ambiguous sound through “Ist wer da? Ist wer da?” becomes a muffled homology to “Isses Verdun? Isses Verdun?” to underscore the subsequent flashback by alluding to the name of an infamous battleground scene of World War I trench warfare.

trenches with both hands pushing into each other's faces, Jean's face distorted by pain and fear and the German soldier's face abstracted into a grimace of death by his gasmask. The battle is replicated in its movements exactly and the soundtrack continues with the exact moans and painful grunts as the film returns to the scene underground where the two figures are reënacting the same fight as in the trenches. Finally, Wittkopp manages to subdue Jean as his mask is pushed off and he knocks him unconscious. He holds Jean's head tenderly as he nods and looks knowingly at the breathing apparatus on the floor that was the source of Jean's mortal anxiety.

Because this sequence highlights the replicability and similarity of a traumatic and potentially deadly misunderstanding to the moment of rescue through both the soundtrack and the image-track, it simultaneously opens up the question of how to differentiate between the situation of threat and the possibility of salvation. What the sequence, therefore, emphasizes is that a mutual understanding cannot be achieved through images alone. Indeed, the image track duplicates the problem by asserting that the face of the enemy might at the same time be the face of salvation and the differentiation between the two cannot be achieved by sight alone. The flashback scene must therefore be located as the beginning of a larger movement towards a duplicity of meaning that culminates in the speeches of international solidarity and its subsequent negation by the official act underground. Precisely because the image of the face in the gasmask has become indeterminate and the sound of drumming on pipes in a plea for rescue is equal to and indistinguishable from the cacophony of the battle, the film intervenes here by reaching to another dimension of signification, toward what Wittkopp will call *meinen*, "intending," in his final speech. This means that the image sequence becomes a moment of deliberate allegorization because we know that behind what looks to be the grimace of death is, in fact, the face of Jean's savior. That is, the gasmask, which up until only a few years before had both figuratively

represented and literally defined the face of the enemy has now been rearticulated and separated into two inherently conflicting modes of signification while retaining the force of its original meaning. The fact that the image of death can now mean the possibility of salvation constitutes an act of imposition that transfers and disperses the menacing image sequence of a man in gasmask approaching into a gesture of hope that cannot be maintained on this level of signification.

Seen this way, *Kameradschaft* follows a trajectory or movement of figuration that, in a sequential culmination towards definitive limit points, attempts to frame meaning by introducing a crisis in the potential definition of the image. The close-up of the face in a gasmask becomes duplicitous in the sense that it cannot be understood as self-evident any longer and becomes doubled in its meaning to incorporate its own negation while oscillating and moving between these two frames of modality. Thus the image constitutes a limit point of meaning and must be complemented by some other force of signification that provides a defining and conclusive framework. However, since speech and sound are subject to the same limitations, the coda takes on a dual function. Certainly, the coda undermines a sense of immediacy in the transparent capacity of speech as the mode for understanding celebrated by the miners, but it makes this visible of a figural level. The problem is defined on a temporal level as well. Given that the speeches are produced for the moment, the momentary unity as evidenced by the intended meaning of the speakers, cannot be sustained and the union is merely temporary. In other words language as speech does not suffice to uphold the moment of a union towards a communion that is defined as standing outside of or apart from communication. The coda then becomes a necessary supplement to indicate a limit point in the relation between sound and image.

When the film replicates the sealing of the borders through the official act of a signature, it therefore also concludes a movement that indicates the impossibility of resolving the question of identity unless it is defined and delineated through the act of writing. The official inscription serves as the final act of imposition and, because of this privileged status, maintains its power of subjection and demarcation. Order has been restored, albeit on a different level. Faced with the difficulty of how to envisage a continuation of the community it has established, the film now submits itself once more to the power of subjection that writing carries with it. That is, in order to maintain the level of meaning as *intention* the way it is articulated in the speeches the film needs to move outside this framework to establish a final boundary in writing. But since this final boundary is the image of a boundary as it is inscribed into the image, the movement thus replicates itself into an allegorical relief. Rather than demonstrating the “irrational semiosis” of the speeches of mutual understanding, as Berman has posited, the film’s conclusion demonstrates the necessity for a shift that constitutes a leap of faith: as an official imprimatur, the film inscribes the words *frontière* and *Grenze* into the image to indicate that its mode of signification has reached its own limit point.

In the mirror image on the screen in which the two officials look at each other from both sides of the border, the image ends as an allegory of boundaries, precisely because it restricts and encloses the space that has been opened up by the miners, but it does so in an emblematic manner to indicate that at this point signification must end. The mirrored gesture that emphasizes the similarity between the two officials renders them identical, and so the film arrests the lines of flight it has set into motion and freezes them into the relief of writing as an act of finality. Neither the image of the face as a mask nor the technology of sound can be understood unequivocally for itself any longer, nor is the miners’ territory legible in terms of nation or

community unless it can find its expression in a different register as writing. Instead, the community of miners must be defined once again by an imposition, not from above, but from below, as it were. Because the film demonstrates the slippage between speech and intention, it resorts to the question of how a community can be defined by showing how the act of definition is tied to identity as a mode of inscription. In the space that has been deterritorialized, the state, through its official representatives who embody its power by proxy with the seal and the signature, intervenes and redefines the boundaries.<sup>117</sup> What the conclusion of *Kameradschaft* then indicates is the complicity between the foundation of state and the act by which a group defines itself from a mass of bodies. The miners' ability to see themselves united replicates the same mechanism that drives the power of the state to delineate and define its members. The gesture that underscores this mechanism is the salute mirrored between the two officials which encapsulates and inverts the unity that the speeches have extolled. The continuation of unity can only be guaranteed by the representatives of the state and the question of who defines this community has been relegated and externalized into writing once more.

What makes the coda so disturbing, in other words, is that it describes as inevitable and conclusive the emergence of the system of the state at the moment a potential community has been defined. Indeed, the state appears because the film has invoked the problem of representation to underscore the question of the reproducibility and dissemination of a community in relation to the celebratory orations of the moment. Absent from the moment of

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<sup>117</sup> The final dialogue emphasizes this with its insistence on order: When the German border guard is asked by his French counterpart “allors, maintenant, tous est en ordre?” he replies, “Ordnung muß sein.” The final lines of dialogue then conclude “Na, das hält wieder. Herr Kollege, haben Sie das Protokoll fertig?” to which the French official replies “Oui, voilà.”

triumphant elation is a reference to the notion of translation, because the miners understand each other completely and purely without having to communicate through different linguistic registers. In this sense, they are engaged in the celebration of relinquishing the necessity of translation, a giving up of the task of translating. This task of the language of translation, as Walter Benjamin has argued, is closely connected to a revelatory anticipation of a “pure language” by the demands on translation to give “voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*...”<sup>118</sup> Ultimately, Benjamin concludes, “[w]here a text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be ‘the true language’ in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable.”<sup>119</sup> In pointing to the sacred dimension of this unconditional translatability, Benjamin locates a capacity where “pure language... no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages.”<sup>120</sup>

In a secularized form, this utopian moment is what we witness in *Kameradschaft* as a communion in spirit between the representatives of the international working class. Their speeches are “unconditionally translatable” and therefore unconditionally understood because this sequence makes manifest what it is that translation, according to Benjamin, should strive for, namely to hint at “the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of

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<sup>118</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 79.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

languages.”<sup>121</sup> For a sound film, in which languages are particularized and their plurality is thus highlighted, this communion through the fulfillment of language marks an important gesture because it echoes the potential of a universal language that the silent film has often been understood to strive toward. But because this moment appears in speech, the conjunction of sound and image that creates a supralinguistic harmony is of momentary duration. Instead, it seems as if the situation that the film offers here cannot be maintained as the conclusion of the film, but rather anticipates a necessary commentary to follow, which will invert the fervent enthusiasm of unity and expose it as a momentary illusion. In his discussion of translation, Walter Benjamin understands this necessity as the “disjunction” between language and content that “prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous,” a situation which Benjamin links to the mode of irony.<sup>122</sup>

Yet it does not suffice to indicate that the film might therefore follow the necessities inherent in the textual mechanisms of signification. Rather, the transition to the allegorical sequence indicates that the film understands the strains that the reliance on speech imposes on the sense of community it attempts to summon. When Wittkopp extols the workers’ transnational community in his speech, since “German or French, it does not matter - we are all workers and miner is miner,”<sup>123</sup> he insists on a community that is founded on a form of social identity, which he considers an essential quality, that is, a state of being, instead of a result of historical forces. The community that Wittkopp evokes, therefore, is one not founded on nationalist assumptions

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> In the original, his statement “Kumpel ist Kumpel” conveys the working-class denomination of *Kumpel* as “miner” but *Kumpel* also carries with it the notion of “mate” or “pal.”

of linguistic difference, or one that transcends the categories established by social hierarchies and structures, but rather one where these differences are beside the point. The question of how to reproduce this community in the medium of film, however, must be articulated on a visual level. The shift, then, to the allegorical coda is ironic, precisely because irony is the figure that exemplifies the difficulty of community, which the film has evoked and now brings to its conclusion.

Nonetheless, this ironic commentary extends beyond a mere subversion of the naïve enthusiasm of the moment. The allegory of the limit point that concludes the film implies that the film has reached its own limits of how to inscribe a sense of community and replicates in a gesture of acceptance the fact that writing imposes an identity which sound cannot reproduce. The figure of the allegory, however, indicates an awareness of the failure of representation. The degree to which allegories must be understood as self-reflexive figures that express their own inadequacy of expression is what Paul de Man insists on. “Allegories,” he states, “are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading.”<sup>124</sup> In the recourse to the allegorical figure, the coda provides an ironic counterpoint, but the irony here serves as a “parabasis,” a digressive and disruptive commentary which reveals the “discontinuity between two rhetorical codes” and thus serves a discursive interruption.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 205. Moreover, de Man continues reflexively, this statement must be understood as “a sentence in which the genitive ‘of’ has itself to be ‘read’ as a metaphor.”

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300. It might appear unseemly to solicit Paul de Man’s work in the context of a study of images of text in the wake of fascism. In a circuitous response to the question “Is Now the Time for Paul de Man?” the title of a panel at the 119<sup>th</sup> annual MLA Convention in 2003, de Man’s contribution to the problem of allegory might be a way to rehabilitate his deconstructive reading method in order to move beyond entrenched and unproductive notions of the



What this disruption makes visible, then, is a process of figuration which comments on its own utopian dimension while positing the state as the ultimate arbiter because of its power of finality. The state gives its “seal” to the status of the final border and arrests the movement of disruption, while at the same time defining itself in national terms as a defined entity. Thus, in this final instance of allegorical displacement *Kameradschaft* fuses the power of writing with the power of the state but, at the same time, yields in submission to this power of inscription. It inscribes and records its own failure to sustain the moment at which it has given voice to the hope of a lasting solidarity beyond borders and now positions the state as the destiny of its own implications. When Pabst understands this allegorical coda as gesture of caution that theater owners would have recognized as “depressing” for the people, he articulates a critical awareness of the film’s power to demand submission in the face of its mechanism of signification.

The solution provided by the coda narrates precisely its own failure to offer a solution to the dilemma of how a true sense of community can be defined or even imagined outside of language and identity. Instead, the submissive gesture in accepting the power of the seal and signature as inevitable might explain the angry responses by both Berman and Kracauer. “In effect,” as Berman declares in a rather peculiar metaphor in this context, “Pabst’s proletarian community is still-born.”<sup>126</sup> Kracauer sees this film as an instance of how German socialist thought, especially in its Social Democratic variant, had “degenerated into anemic abstractions” and thus we see mirrored in the film the apathetic “exhaustion” suffered by German socialists

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importance of deconstruction. To invoke the larger debate again is perhaps untimely, but befits a project, which, in Jacques Derrida’s words, represents “the at least necessary condition for identifying and combating the totalitarian risks in all ... forms.” From Jacques Derrida, “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War,” in *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 242.

<sup>126</sup> Berman, p. 117.

from the “dead weight of an outworn ideology.”<sup>127</sup> While these may be valid charges against the efficacy of Social Democratic ideas as articulated by Pabst’s film, a careful reading of the allegorizing coda indicates that the “abstraction” at work here carries with it a more complex and self-reflexive dimension than Kracauer or Berman give the film credit for.

Pabst stages the figure of allegory within a trajectory that moves from the mask to oratory to the signature and the inscription of a final boundary. From the shock through a misrecognition of the face of the redeemer as the mask of the enemy he moves to a communion of the workers that transcends linguistic differences. But by culminating with the “exhausting” abstraction of the power of the state to demarcate its limits, *Kameradschaft* poses the question of how, exactly, this sense of inexorability can be represented. What the film achieves, then, is a profound understanding of the limits of representation in relation to a political rhetoric of images that restricts and reifies differentiation through an act of writing. Seen in this way, the film’s hope lies not in the technology of sound, which confirms the difficulty of communication, and certainly not in the seal of the state, but rather in the silent and shocking moment of recognition when the mask of the enemy is understood as a human face that belongs to the same community. Kracauer’s sense of “exhaustion” can therefore perhaps be found in the struggle for this moment; it is significant that the French miner collapses in panic and faints before he sees his German counterpart behind the gasmask.

The film thus places a difficult burden of responsibility on its audience: it insists on a different register which would enable us to see the process of allegorization in the same way that we know the intentions of the face behind the gasmask, the *meinen* of the image, as it were. In this sense, the film, indeed, capitulates by acceding the power of naming to the state. The

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<sup>127</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 242.

inscription of the border that reterritorializes the space within which the nation is defined occurs precisely in the absence of a people or a community and in fact seals off, or encloses, this space. The absurdity of this gesture nonetheless does not mask its savage consequences. The bureaucratic desire of the state for its orderly demarcation organizes any potential communal space, including the one found in a threatening smithy of a kind of subterranean frontier land, into an abstract delineation of boundaries that must not be crossed. With this gesture the film signals its own failure to uphold the promise of a communal utopia; because it allegorizes its own limit point, the final sequence provides an image for the film's aporia.

This aporia demonstrates the limit of an imaginary community and leaves the spectator trapped in the face of the writing on the wall, since the border line that has been inscribed serves to imprison us as well as to keep others out. With this allegorical conclusion, the film comments on its own enthusiasm and renders it in "awkward heavy-handedness," which, according to Walter Benjamin, is "essential to allegory."<sup>128</sup> The conclusion may therefore very well be understood as an act of cruelty in the violent manner that Benjamin ascribes to the "emblematiser," who "drags the essence of what is depicted out before the image, in writing, as a caption."<sup>129</sup> No wonder, then, that the theater owners in Pabst's recollection did not see the satirical dimension that Kracauer ascribes to the epilogue. Neither is the ironic reversal of the film "liberating" in the sense that through its coda a definitive means for action becomes possible. It is, therefore, all the more ironic that the theater owners' decision evoked by Pabst would be based on an idea that imagines the speeches as a more uplifting conclusion. Instead, the failure of intention is what we are left with. The film "means well," the *Meinen* that Wittkopp

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<sup>128</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 187.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

evokes, but the awareness of the futility of such intentions in the face of the power of the state to impose its powers of inscription ultimately demands an act of submission. The potential community found in the masses is ultimately folded into the cruel acceptance of an entity that seems to exist before and outside of this community, namely the power of demarcation that is represented by its state servants. Its ability to permanently encode boundaries enables a seamless return to written treaties and documents. It is this mode of communication that remains ultimately translatable and eminently reproducible. The union extolled by Wittkopp and his French comrade has already been established in the bureaucracy of the state much more efficiently.

In the triangulation of the transitory and fleeting speeches subsumed under the tension between the two modes of inscription a force field of signification is established. It is on this level that we can return to the relevance of Kracauer's concern with Weimar cinema again, because what we are confronting then is a politics of the image that moves beyond the mere excavation of ideological deep structures. Neither does it constitute a focus on crude psychologism, despite Kracauer's subtitle which offers a "psychological history of the German film" and his copious use of such terms as "mentality" or "psychological disposition."<sup>130</sup> It is important to note that in his introduction Kracauer asserts the necessity to consider cinematic phenomena such as the close-up as indicative of the capacity of films to "fulfill an innate mission in ferreting out minutiae."<sup>131</sup> Kracauer thinks here first and foremost of the fundamental elements that constitute the filmic image and the gestural dimensions recorded on celluloid: borrowing the term from Horace M. Kallen, Kracauer understands these minutiae as paramount for an

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<sup>130</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

understanding of the cinema because they contain the ““visible hieroglyphs’ ... permeating both the stories and the visuals” that remain to be deciphered in order to determine “the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge.”<sup>132</sup>

This mode of deciphering corresponds to a desire of what Carlo Ginzburg calls the “evidential paradigm” for the epistemological method of conjecture through inadvertent and seemingly marginal “clues,” a method which, as Ginzburg demonstrates, is nonetheless firmly grounded in the “conjectural paradigm of semiotics.”<sup>133</sup> Ginzburg delineates how this paradigm of classification, from its ancient origins in the venatic knowledge of traces, marks and tracks to the medical conception of diagnosis on the basis of symptomatic readings or psychoanalytic interpretations of the unconscious, is closely linked to a philological or semiotic method, which, “based on discarded information” and “on marginal data,” yields productive insights precisely because these fragments escape “conscious control.”<sup>134</sup> Kracauer, whose own methodology is deeply indebted to this conjectural paradigm and thus allows him to establish the “retrospective” divination of his historicism,<sup>135</sup> uses it to determine a specific national character or the nation’s “inner life” in order to establish a particularized notion of identity that can be imposed on the definition of an entire nation.

Ginzburg shows how this far-reaching epistemological method must also be linked to progressive developments towards more effective forms of social and disciplinary control. He

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Kracauer’s use of the term “visible hieroglyphs” is cited here from Horace M. Kallen, *Art and Freedom*, vol. 2 (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), p. 809.

<sup>133</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidentiary Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 117 – 118.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 117.

examines the manner in which the epistemological project of individualizing classification is connected to the attempts of obtaining solidified degrees of specificity and unalterable characteristics through a bureaucracy of control in the British colonies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here the implementation of fingerprinting as a method of identification in this period is evidence for a conceptual shift in which minutely visible traces and surface marks now provide the ability to differentiate and define into “individuals” a mass of people which would otherwise appear indistinguishable within the category of race. In order to impose an efficient means of control, fingerprinting offered the British colonial administration a more effective way of differentiation because it enabled an “indistinct mass” to become “at one stroke individuals, each one distinguished by a specific biological mark.”<sup>136</sup>

As Ginzburg notes, the category of “individuality” derives its ubiquity first and foremost from an administrative necessity for control. This form of control works along similar lines with the general modalities of discipline and mechanisms of power that Michel Foucault describes in the process of “disciplinary partitioning,” whereby “authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding ... and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution.”<sup>137</sup> Ginzburg shows how this differentiation through the “prodigious extension of the concept of individuality was in fact occurring by means of the State, its bureaucracy and police.”<sup>138</sup> In this respect a widespread and diffuse paradigm of analytical

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>137</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 199.

<sup>138</sup> Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, p. 123.

conjecture found its utilitarian implementation through the increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of disciplinary categorization that facilitated identification and control by the state.

However, the value of Ginzburg's work lies not only in charting and clarifying the means by which various forms of knowledge, be they scientific, folkloristic, divinatory, or disciplinary, have been organized within the fundamental framework of this particular epistemological model or how they were put to use for pervasive social control. In his account, Ginzburg offers the possibility of returning to the paradigm by way of a mode of reasoning he terms "aphoristic," as opposed to "systematic thought."<sup>139</sup> This mode constitutes "an attempt to formulate evaluations of man and society on the basis of symptoms and clues; a man and a society that are sick, *in crisis*."<sup>140</sup> While Ginzburg emphasizes the literary nature of this mode of thinking, he also underscores its immediate relevance to everyday life and "daily existence," that is, "to those situations in which the unique and indispensable nature of the data is decisive to the persons involved."<sup>141</sup> What Ginzburg describes here is a conceptual realm in which large-scale social crises manifest themselves in *relation to* the individual by indirect means. In other words, the mode of expression through which the individual can understand his position in relation to an "idea of totality" or in relation to a "complex social structure" arises precisely because "the existence of a deeply rooted relationship that explains superficial phenomena is confirmed the very moment it is stated that direct knowledge of such a connection is not possible."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

What this indicates is how a variety of social forces and forms of knowledge are constructed but, at the same time, indirectly accessible, because, as Ginzburg formulates it, even “[t]hough reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones – signs, clues – which allow us to penetrate it.”<sup>143</sup> These “privileged zones” determine a confluence in which epistemological and social force fields converge in order to become expressed as a sign. This process of manifestation is what we might call a general mode of significance, but it corresponds more concretely to the indirect form of expression of allegorization that Walter Benjamin calls a “schema,”<sup>144</sup> because once the object of investigation becomes allegorical it is imbued with an external, not inherent, significance and it “remains behind dead” as a trace of evidence.<sup>145</sup> About this allegorical object, Benjamin continues:

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 184.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 183 - 184. In the translation by John Osborne the full sentence, which emphasizes the melancholy aspect of this investigation, reads: “If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure, then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power.” The term *exposed* here obscures the historical character of the allegorical object in its remnant as documentary evidence. Benjamin uses the term *überliefert*, which indicates a temporal dimension through its fragmentary nature: “Wird der Gegenstand unterm Blick der Melancholie allegorisch, läßt sie das Leben von ihm abfließen, bleibt er als toter, doch in Ewigkeit gesicherter zurück, so liegt er vor dem Allegoriker, auf Gnade und Ungnade ihm überliefert.” Perhaps Osborne is thinking here instead of the term *ausgeliefert*, which would resonate with an exposure to someone’s mercy as well. Cf. *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, bk. 1, *Abhandlungen*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1978), p. 359.



“[I]t is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it, and stands behind it; not in a psychological but in an ontological sense. In his hands the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge; and he reveres it as the emblem of this. This is what determines the character of allegory as a form of writing. It is a schema; and as a schema it is an object of knowledge, but it is not securely possessed until it becomes a fixed schema: at one and the same time a fixed image and a fixing sign.”<sup>146</sup>

This for Benjamin constitutes the “wealth of ciphers”<sup>147</sup> that enable the allegorist to articulate them within a system of signification of a different order. In order to emphasize these schemata of “hidden knowledge” encapsulated by allegory, Benjamin makes reference to a commentary by the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic theologian Franz von Baader, in which Baader declares that “everything we see in external nature is, for us, already writing, a kind of sign-language, which nevertheless lacks the most essential feature: pronunciation; this must quite simply have come from somewhere else and been given to man.”<sup>148</sup> Benjamin understands this excessive dimension of meaning as that which the allegorist then articulates “‘from somewhere else’..., by no means avoiding that arbitrariness which is the most drastic manifestation of the power of knowledge.”<sup>149</sup> Significance, in other words, is acquired in allegory through indirect means displaced to the point of arbitrariness; that is, it is articulated or pronounced from “elsewhere,”

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<sup>146</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 184.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Franz Xaver von Baader (1765 – 1841), “Über den Einfluß der Zeichen der Gedanken auf deren Erzeugung und Gestaltung,” from his *Sämtliche Werke*, posthumously published in Leipzig 1851. Cited in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, p. 184.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

yet its presence throughout “external nature” as ciphers or clues is, paradoxically, grounded in a system of signification that follows specific and recognizable emblematic schemata which nonetheless need to be read and deciphered.

Thus we can establish a structural connection between Kracauer’s project of tracing the “clues” that Weimar cinema provides and the Benjaminian concept of allegorical schemata that manifest themselves as a particular mode of expression. Ginzburg’s description of how intricately political and social operations of the state might become entangled in this conceptual process of relating minute details to a systematic totality should remind us of the fact that formations of power and control operate on both micro- and macro-dimensions of scale. This conjunction, therefore, indicates why the pervasive use of writing on the screen does not merely constitute a thematic or, worse, an ornamental element, but rather must be seen as a fundamental mode of expression. Through this mode we gain access to indirect “clues,” which, precisely because they are so entangled with daily existence, must be understood as “mute forms of knowledge in the sense that their precepts do not lend themselves to being either formalized or spoken.”<sup>150</sup> Moreover, as Ginzburg shows, these conceptual forms are not in and of themselves liberating, because they may operate and be employed within disciplinary modes of coercion, persuasion or control.

Benjamin’s category of allegory as an operative schema is important in this respect since it underscores the twofold aspects of its manifestation as a convergence between “fixing sign” and “fixed image” at the same time. In this sense we need to take into account both the mode in which allegorical schemata become “fixed” or arrested into images, as well as the mode that mobilizes and reorganizes signs within signification as such. A temporal dimension, however,

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<sup>150</sup> Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, p. 124.

needs to be introduced into this doubling modality. In the allegorical mode of signification temporal movement is frozen or arrested into expressions or, as Benjamin puts it, “in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.”<sup>151</sup> This image incorporates the traces of history as they are etched into the human face, which becomes the form where “[e]verything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head.”<sup>152</sup> As a mode of expression, then, allegory records the traces of history “in the stations of its decline.”<sup>153</sup> What Benjamin emphasizes, however, is that this corresponds to a dimension of scale in which minutiae and totality, historical monumentality and individual particularity, coexist on one plane, so that allegory becomes the “form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious” and which therefore “gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual.”<sup>154</sup> From this we can draw a parallel between allegory as a record that arrests the movements of history and stages them in expressive relief and its status as a fragmentary and dated remnants of a larger structures, or as Benjamin declares, “[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in

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<sup>151</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, p. 166. The “hippocratic face” is a medical description for the facial symptoms associated with impending death or long-term debilitating illness. The *OED* defines *hippocratic* as an adjective “applied to the shrunken and livid aspect of the countenance immediately before death, or in a case of exhaustion threatening death: so called because described by Hippocrates.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “hippocratic.”

<sup>152</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

the realm of things.”<sup>155</sup> In this respect, allegories constitute repetitive gestures that express their own character indirectly or allegorically while at the same time calling attention to their material status as allegories.

The political implications of this insight for the cinema are marked out by Giorgio Agamben when he insists that “the element of the cinema is gesture and not image.”<sup>156</sup> In his explication of the necessity to conceive of images as gestures, Agamben builds on Deleuze’s concept of movement-images and notes that images are “animated by an antinomic polarity” between the “reification and obliteration of a gesture,” which is “the imago as death mask or as symbol,” and the encapsulated preservation of a larger movement of which the images are a part.<sup>157</sup> In its function as a mode of meaning, gesture, like a march or a dance, doubles as a movement that cannot be separated from either its duration or from the process of its meaning; in this respect, gesture opens up access to the means by which it means. Gesture thus communicates its “communicability” and, therefore, makes visible “the sphere of a pure and endless mediality”<sup>158</sup> without any transcendental reference point at which the state of mediality would be resolved. Rather, gesture means its own manner of signification while saying nothing so much as the circumstances of its own restriction.

What this also implies is that gesture marks the moments at which a limit point of communicability is reached, or, as Agamben formulates it, “the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language,” an inability he likens to a gag” in

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>156</sup> Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, p. 55.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

its original restrictive sense.<sup>159</sup> This displacement of communicability which, when faced with a blockage, shifts into a different register of expressibility demonstrates the pervasive range of gestures and must be taken literally. When speech encounters an obstacle and can no longer be voiced or articulated, gesture attempts to take over. In this sense, writing in film must be understood in its gestural qualities as a displacement of that which cannot be articulated as image, as speech or otherwise into writing. It is on this level of gesturality that Agamben locates the sphere of pure politics because gestures become a record of the *means* that are endured in the gesture. In other words, in gestures are arranged the attempts at recovery and reclamation of a loss of ease and a “sense of naturalness,”<sup>160</sup> which leads Agamben to the apodictic declaration that “in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss.”<sup>161</sup>

The remarkable implications of this observation can be connected to the project Kracauer sets out for himself as well if we follow Agamben’s assessment that “the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable.”<sup>162</sup> This is the realm that Kracauer establishes as his terrain of study when he determines that it is necessary to extend what he calls “the normal field of vision” in order to include the element of “something unaccountable” in the attempt to explain the rise of fascism in Weimar Germany.<sup>163</sup> The predilections and dispositions that he evokes are recorded on the screen as “imperceptible

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 10.

surface data” that supply the “clues” that need to be deciphered by the film historian.<sup>164</sup> Kracauer’s frame of reference that renders his project as an exploration of the psychology and “mentality” of a nation might therefore be understood, in a variation of Agamben’s terms, as a bourgeois myopic obsession which “succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology.”<sup>165</sup>

Instead of neglecting or dismissing Kracauer’s mode of explanation, this frame of reference might rather be understood productively as a way of explaining the necessity to take seriously the cinema’s ability to record the figural and gestural instances that determine the politics of signification and thus yield the figural “clues” around which a sense of history can be determined as allegories. Because these figurations take the form of writing in relevant instances of Weimar cinema, it becomes necessary to trace and highlight these patterns. Like gestures and allegories, the functions of the writing on the screen are doubled, but because in its indexical component writing appears merely as writing, rather than as a figural inscription rendered in writing, its relevance might be obscured precisely because of its seeming self-evidence. If we take seriously the politics of the gesture in *Kameradschaft*, where the allegory of its own exhaustion for representation beckons the representatives of the power of the state, we can see this notion extended to Fritz Lang’s films that continue the trajectory of writing as a conflicting force of power that establishes and delineates the social order.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>165</sup> Agamben, p. 53.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE LETTER AND THE LAW: MOBILIZATION AND ARREST ACROSS FRITZ LANG'S *MABUSE* FILMS AND *M*

To determine the status of writing in these films as significant moments around which questions of the state are articulated, a closer look at such instances in another important film, released only two years after *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and directed by Fritz Lang, the epic two-part film *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* (1922) is necessary. Lang was originally scheduled to direct *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and is frequently said to have invented its famous narrative framing device.<sup>1</sup> As was his wont, Fritz Lang, in a typical attempt at self-aggrandizement, apparently embellished a conversation with Lotte Eisner when he told her that he had originally planned to open *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* with a fast montage sequence depicting significant current and recent Weimar political events: from the *Spartakisten* street fights during the uprisings of the winter of 1918/1919, the rightwing coup attempts to overthrow the government by military

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<sup>1</sup> For more thorough discussions on the narrative framework and the *Rahmenhandlung* question see Prawer, Jung, and Schatzberg, eds., *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wiens Film von 1919/1920* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), David Robinson, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), and Mike Budd, ed., *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

remnants such as the *Brigade Ehrhardt* and others in the *Kapp-Putsch* of March 1920, to the murder of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Walter Rathenau in June of 1922 by the nationalist anti-Semitic “Organization Consul.” This prologue sequence was to be followed by an initial large-scale intertitle that exclaimed “Who is behind all this?” and another title in which the word “I” would rush feverishly toward and impose itself on the spectator. The source of this voice would then be revealed in the image that now constitutes the first scene, namely Dr. Mabuse, who stares directly into the camera since he is seated in front of his dressing room mirror, while he is about to begin the selection of his disguise for the day from postcard photographs fanned in his hand like a deck of cards. Tom Gunning has investigated Lang’s claims for the prologue sequence and dismisses its veracity while taking note of its “confused political thinking” that traces socialist uprisings, military coups, and rightwing terror and equates them into the acts of one individual agent as a form of “political obscurantism.”<sup>2</sup>

As has been demonstrated, Lang was prone to recollect events of his life that often seem to have been taken straight out of pivotal scenes from his own films and, moreover, used to tell them in such a manner that befit their dramatic structures almost too smugly and precisely.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, despite its apocryphal nature, the potential prologue sequence indicates Lang’s recollection of the film as one that invokes the violent political struggles for a system of control within the state, albeit rendered in melodramatic terms as the subversive work of a single

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 118. Gunning refers to a conversation recorded in Lotte Eisner’s *Fritz Lang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) and continues by saying that it is “more likely that Lang was mis-remembering the opening of his 1928 film *Spies*.”

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) and Gösta Werner, “Fritz Lang and Goebbels: Myth and Facts,” *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (spring 1990): 24-27.



mastermind criminal. Mabuse's counterpart is the State Attorney von Wenk, a peculiar adversary, because, as a bland civil servant, he does not comport himself like a dashing individualist action hero, nor does he convey the demeanor of a detective who solves his case through sharp-edged ratiocinations or logical deductions. Instead, von Wenk is the direct bureaucratic representative of the state the very foundations of which are under siege. He reports frequently to his office where he uses the telephone, reads correspondence and receives visitors. At the same time, his lank body and high forehead suggest an aristocratic reserve and an East Prussian sobriety which offers a cinematic character image that would delight a phrenologist. In order to gain access to the illegal gambling dens throughout the city where "The Great Unknown," as von Wenk calls his target, is operating, he receives an informant's list with the locations and corresponding passwords (his "open-sesame" key, as a dialogue title will later state). These code words are innocuous terms such as *Ananas* ("pineapple") for the *Palais Andalusia*, *Schlepper* ("trawler") for a *Weinstube* on Schifferdamm, *Marmor* ("marble") for a café on the *Wienerstraße*, and so on. To converge the work of the spectator with that of the von Wenk on screen, Lang offers the decoding of these clues as a visual reference to perceptive and nimble readers among the film's audiences, who would have been able to discern the derivations of the passwords as humorously associative rather than random, since the code words correspond in a playful manner to the names or locations of their applicability, so that the "ship" in *Schifferdamm* becomes "trawler," "marble" is linked to Viennese architecture, and the exotic fruit "pineapple" effects an open door into the Andalusian palace.

Von Wenk's mode of operation is therefore leveled in analogy to that of a spectator, namely, to process information, to sift through records and documents, and to assemble fragments of knowledge into a larger coherent whole. Mabuse, in contrast, is the one who

orchestrates campaigns of deception and misinformation. His character is introduced with a crime that is minutely choreographed and executed. In a synchronized effort, a courier is attacked on a train while transporting the secret documents of a Dutch-Swiss trade agreement, its title page *contrats commercial* exposed, as if by x-ray vision into his briefcase. The documents are then thrown into a moving taxi, whose subsequent accident is staged in order to enable Mabuse to take possession of the folder with the treaty. Rumors begin to circulate and when news of the disappearance of the treaty spreads, the stock market turns into a selling frenzy (“Baisse!” a title informs) because revelation of its details might jeopardize the actual implementation of the agreement. Mabuse buys all the stocks when they have dropped to their lowest point and then lets the treaty surface intact. An intertitle shows news wire services reporting the recovery of the treaty, concluding with the phrase “no cause for alarm,” and the market turns on this information. “Hausse!” declares the German intertitle.

Conforming to the public persona he liked to maintain, Fritz Lang considered himself an archivist of his time and, indeed, the film’s subtitles for its two parts are *Part I: The Great Gambler – A Portrait of the Time* and *Part II: Inferno – A Play About People of Our Time*.<sup>4</sup> Both Lotte Eisner and Kracauer discuss this film as a sign of the times and as a direct representation of contemporary life, while numerous reviews praised the film for capturing the *Zeitgeist*.<sup>5</sup> Such

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<sup>4</sup> In the original *Der Große Spieler – Ein Bild der Zeit* and *Inferno – Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit*.

<sup>5</sup> Lotte Eisner in her *Haunted Screen* states that “critics of 1922 recognized the unflattering but authentic reflection of their own day.” Cf. Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (1952; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 240. Siegfried Kracauer quotes a 1924 article by Fritz Lang entitled “Kitsch – Sensation – Kultur und Film,” in which “Lang himself called the film a document about the current world.” Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

claims of authenticity and accuracy have been part of the discourse around the medium cinema from its inception and, as such, do not carry much relevance, but this remarkable consensus enables us to consider whether the uses of writing in the film should be considered as part of the apparently evidentiary and thus documentary character of the film or whether they serve another function. Lang himself was an avid chronicler and archivist of his time and “thought of himself as a newspaper reporter,” who developed a meticulous “habit of reading newspapers with a pair of scissors at hand to clip items to file into categories in folders.”<sup>6</sup>

The image of the director as a conduit and information processor who assembles news items, fragmentary documents, and pieces of trivia, and then rearranges these disparate elements into a larger cinematic context is an intriguing concept that goes beyond such traditional definitions of the filmmaker’s work as that of the *metteur-en-scène*, the creative genius, or the studio auteur. Moreover, this mode of collecting calls attention to the importance of fragmentary details in Lang’s films and emphasizes the archival quality that Lang’s obsessive attention to the verisimilitude of details desired to achieve and allows us to consider his film as a terrain where the various trajectories of forms of knowledge and information intersect. In these moments of interference, Lang’s film conveys a constellation of the elements of daily existence, the anecdotal detritus of information as filtered through the newspaper and magazine media, and its concomitant commonsensical explanations of the public sphere. Already from a strictly auteurist point of view, this would justify the focus of our attention to the seemingly marginal details, the

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Press, 1974), p. 81. Patrick McMillan in his Lang biography *The Nature of the Beast*, p. 86, cites three contemporary reviews: “‘A mirror of the age,’ declared *Das Tagebuch*. ‘An archive of its time,’ agreed *Vorwärts*, the leading Social Democratic Party organ. ‘A document of our time, echoed *Die Welt am Sonntag*.’”

<sup>6</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, p. 81.

scraps of paper and clippings of writing that Lang has recorded and assembled in his films, as it were.

The terrain of conflict for the film is marked out from the beginning as a struggle for control of information and manipulation of knowledge that circulates in the social realm. The struggle over information and perception, however, has an added degree of sinister implications. Mabuse is not only a manipulator of information and the dissemination and circulation thereof but also of perception as such. He is able to hypnotize people from a distance and one of his disguises is as Sandor Weltmann, an Indian fakir who offers public performances of experiments in “mass suggestion,” trance, hypnosis, and other psychic phenomena. He also runs a psychiatric practice as Dr. Mabuse, which offers him insight into his patients’ subconscious mental processes. In the focus on how Mabuse’s hypnotic powers are associated with the control of vision and perception, many commentators have observed Mabuse’s “control of the gaze” and the “primacy of Mabuse’s look within this system” of perception.<sup>7</sup> When von Wenk comes across the target of his manhunt for the first time at the gambling tables in the back rooms of the Palais Andalusia, Mabuse is playing under the guise of the Dutch Professor van den Gruich. Von Wenk, himself in disguise and now looking like a heavily drinking nightclub patron, sits down at the other end of the table but does not yet know whom he is facing. He tempts Mabuse as van den Gruich by displaying a wallet bulging with a large stash of banknotes. The professor responds to this temptation by removing an unusual pair of square spectacles and, by toying with them in his hands, begins to refract light beams into von Wenk’s face. As Mabuse stares down at the pair of glasses, the stare of his piercing eyes seems to be reflected in the light as well. An iris

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example, Stephen Jenkins, “Lang: Fear and Desire,” in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. Stephen Jenkins (London: BFI Publishing, 1981), p. 66.

close-up focuses on von Wenk's struggle with the threat of a gradual descent into hypnosis and then on the vectors of light emanating from the spectacles. A confused von Wenk stammers that these seem to be "Chinese spectacles," which Mabuse confirms with the ominous intertitle "Yes, from TSI-NAN-FU!!" Another shot, from Mabuse's point of view and visually emphasized by two mask bars that wipe into the image from either side of the screen, shows von Wenk slowly losing control over his action. This is followed by an extreme close-up of Mabuse's piercing eyes. When Mabuse deals von Wenk his pair of cards, the Six of Clubs and the Two of Diamonds, a close-up shows how their numeric values dissolve into letters: Tsi – Nan and F-U, respectively. The state attorney looks up and we see the staring face of Mabuse, eerily radiated, while only the faces of those around him gradually fade into black. His suspended head pulls in the camera's perspective until the screen frames his entire face. An intertitle announces his demand that "you take!" another card.

Because this is the first moment when von Wenk experiences the power of Mabuse firsthand, this scene is characterized by the remarkable optical effect through the use of matting and its disorienting tracking shot that seems to pull the camera lens and, along with it, the spectator's helpless gaze towards Mabuse's eyes. The scene has notably been commented upon as early as Rudolf Arnheim's 1932 work *Film als Kunst*. Arnheim discusses the concept of the "relativity of movement" and "the absence of the sense of balance"<sup>8</sup> with the particular example from the film, since it disorients the spectator: movement and the spectator's relation to it is used in this scene, "in which, in order to demonstrate the power of a mysterious man, his face appears small against a dark background, glides forward swiftly, growing larger, until it becomes so huge that it

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<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art*, trans. L.M. Sieveking and Ian F.D. Morrow (1932; reprint Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 102.

occupies the whole screen.”<sup>9</sup> The scene orchestrates a triangulation of three perspectives as the camera slowly tracks closer in the direction of the illuminated face of the staring Mabuse, now seemingly detached from his body and hovering in midair, so that it seems as if his magnetic gaze is pulling the spectator, in lieu of von Wenk’s point-of-view, inexorably closer toward him. Kracauer comments on the hypnosis vignette as an example of the omnipotent scopic power of Mabuse, since the scene shows him to be a “devouring creature” as his “face gleams out of the jet-black screen, then, with frightening speed, rushes to the foreground and fills the whole frame, his cruel, strong-willed eyes fastened upon the audience.”<sup>10</sup> The visual effect is certainly spectacular. Tom Gunning in his careful description of the scene calls it “visual pyrotechnics” and notes how the “camera movement follows the trajectory of the gaze, giving it an almost ejaculatory power.”<sup>11</sup> Gunning places this sequence within the larger context of an integral aspect of Lang’s fascination with the connection of optic trajectories and regimes of power and the discussions of medium film itself as an instrument of hypnosis and mass suggestion, since “Lang’s alignment of the power of cinema with hypnosis pulls in a broader discussion on the nature of film, one intimately linked with... concerns about the effect of this new medium.”<sup>12</sup> The vectors of the gaze make explicit the link between Mabuse’s eyes, power and control.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> In the open-source encyclopedia Wikipedia, an “open-market” forum for the collection of general information, contemporary knowledge and commonsensical explanations to which anyone can contribute, this scene is also described with an apocryphal anecdote. In the anecdote, contemporary critics of the film are said to have derided the scene by noting the rack-pull effect of the movement described by the camera with a commentary on the distance

However, because the focal point in the visualization of this triangulation is the gaze, one of the fundamental aspects in theories of the cinematic apparatus, Tom Gunning restricts his discussion to this particular aspect in the sequence, without developing a similar rigorous theorization for the status of the writing in this powerful sequence. The letters that spell *Tsi Nan Fu* are relegated to a secondary category, namely “words”: they are “magical” or “mysterious,”<sup>14</sup> but nonetheless they are merely words for Gunning, who focuses on the interplay between the “ray of power”<sup>15</sup> and the recipients of the gaze as it is localized in the exchanges of looks between the two antagonists. What is neglected, then, in his emphasis on the ocular aspect of power is the transposition and exchange of this power into writing. The letters encapsulate the power of the Mabuse’s gaze, so that his hypnotic force is externalized and detached from the physical connection to his eyes. At the same time, they contaminate the field of vision through an act of imposition, in the same way that inner voices might compel a schizophrenic, but detached from a specific subjectivity. This notion of contamination is further underscored when the State Attorney cautiously lifts up his cards again. From underneath, the letters *Tsi Nan Fu* are now emanating in an eerily radioactive, almost neon-light-like glow as if they are burning through the gambling table. The field of vision of the representative of the state is now a contested terrain between his autonomous perception and the searing letters that are burnt into his sight. Moreover, the space on the screen has been contaminated as well, since the letters now radiate as if they are originating from a light source outside of the diegetic space, which makes itself

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covered: “new German record, 1. 2 meters.” The anecdote is cited in Günter Scholdt, ed., *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler: Roman/Film/ Dokumente*, (St. Ingbert: WJ Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1987). Cf. entry <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mabuse>.

<sup>14</sup> Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

visible from underneath the table and points to a source from which a powerful energy flows into the terrain of the gambling den.

To describe this struggle as a territorial conflict, therefore, in which competing regimes of power and energy vie for the vision of von Wenk, is not as far-fetched or inconsequential as it might seem. The fact that Tsi-Nan-Fu is the place of origin for the spectacles makes the word itself a sufficiently Orientalist enigma to conjure up inexplicable mechanisms of power and mysterious forces beyond the scope of rational, that is Western modes of explanation or comprehension. As such, its use in this context might not need to be investigated further unless understood as a trope of convention to connote an exoticist locus of energy. But *Tsi-nan-fu* also corresponds to the old German transcription of the Chinese town of Jinan.<sup>16</sup> The name *Tsi-nan-fu* thus carries with it echoes of an important part of the belated, but, because of this, even more fervent German colonialist enterprise that culminated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the imperial expansions under Emperor Wilhelm II and that ended unceremoniously and definitively with the Treaty of Versailles. The fact that Mabuse in the disguise of van den Gruich is repeatedly identified as a Dutch national and that the film begins with a Dutch-Swiss trade agreement, lends credence to an associative connection here, because the Netherlands provided the German Emperor with a place for his exile after his abdication and were themselves a nation with a significant number of colonial territories under their control.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. entry *Kiautschou* in *Deutscher Kolonial-Atlas mit Illustriertem Jahrbuch 1910, herausgegeben auf Veranlassung der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft, bearbeitet von Paul Sprigade und Max Moisel, Berlin 1910, p. 33ff.* Reprinted online by the German pedagogical site Zentrale für Unterrichtsmedien im Internet e.V. at <http://www.zum.de/psm/imperialismus/kolonialatlas10/atlas19.php>.



The capital of the Shandong province, Jinan was one of the primary towns to which the sphere of influence extended after the German Navy had seized the harbor city of Qingdao (transcribed as *Tsingtau* in German) in 1897 and imposed a “zone of protection” (*Schutzgebiet*, the official nomenclature for all German colonial territories) for the region of Jiao zhou (German *Kiautschou*), which remained under German control until the Japanese invasion in late 1914. The German aspirations for colonial possessions in Qingdao were driven by strategic naval interests as well as the promise of access to the vast reserves from the coalmines in the *Hinterland*.<sup>17</sup> In order to achieve these goals, industrial interests were bundled in a syndicate that organized and facilitated the construction of the railroads between the harbor city of Qingdao and the coalmines around Jinan under the auspices of two German companies and thus affirmed the German military and political strength in economic terms. To a large degree, Chinese resistance in the area to these activities by the railroad company, the *Schantung-Eisenbahngesellschaft*, and the mining company, the *Schantung-Bergbaugesellschaft*, coincided with the so-called “Boxer Rebellion,” one of the long-simmering resistance movements across Northern China that erupted with particular violence in 1900. This rebellion against foreign occupation was brutally and savagely repressed by the European powers, but it served to undermine the tenuous Western

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the German colonial occupation of Qingdao, see the catalogue for the 1998 exhibition *Tsingtau* in the Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin, especially the article by Klaus Mühlhahn, “Deutsche Vorposten im Hinterland: Die infrastrukturelle Durchdringung der Provinz Schantung,” available online at [http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/tsingtau/katalog/auf1\\_13.htm](http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/tsingtau/katalog/auf1_13.htm). The railroad connections from Kiautschou to Tsinanfu were completed in 1904, so that “Tsinanfu was officially opened for international trade on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1906.” Cf. Hans Heinrich Joseph Meyer, ed., *Das Deutsche Kolonialreich: Eine Länderkunde der deutschen Schutzgebiete. Zweiter Band: Togo, Südwestafrika, Schutzgebiete in der Südsee und Kiautschougebiet* (Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1910), p. 535.

fantasies of a subordinate and pliable Chinese population and shook to the core the foundations of legitimacy on which the self-image of a benevolent and paternal colonial ruler rested.

What shines through with the illumination of the letters *Tsi-Nan-Fu*, then, cannot be reduced to a mere exoticism or a facile moment of kitsch in which incantations of alien names substitute for the presence of a mysterious force of power. Rather, into the field of vision of the state attorney a violent force interferes, through which is refracted the history of a loss of territorial influence and the fear of savage uprisings against legitimate and preordained forms of authority. Moreover, this conflict is rendered as a battle of will over control in the very same terms that characterize the German colonialist adventure. A description from 1910, in part published to coincide as a commemoration of 25 years of the colonial German enterprise, puts the territorial struggle in grandiose providential terms by stating that a

“struggle both peaceful and martial in kind has begun, ... in which, under the mighty breath of the white race’s energy, even those independent East Asian realms on the Pacific coasts that are not yet within the political control of this race have awakened from their cultural slumber and have entered this arena of wrestling.”<sup>18</sup>

The author makes reference to the “Boxer confusions” (“Boxerwirren”)<sup>19</sup> and moves on to determine that

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Georg Wegener, “Das Kiautschougebiet,” in Hans Heinrich Joseph Meyer, ed., *Das Deutsche Kolonialreich*, p. 502. In the original: “Ein Ringen, friedlicher und kriegerischer Art hat begonnen... Unter dem mächtigen Anhauch der Energie der weißen Rasse sind auch die einzigen nicht unter ihrer politischen Herrschaft stehenden Gebiete der pazifischen Küsten, die noch unabhängigen Reiche Ostasiens, aus ihrem Kulturschlummer erwacht und beginnen mit in jenes Ringen einzutreten.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 500.

“nowhere on earth are there today more fundamental, deeper oppositions and differences between races and civilizations than here in East Asia, where only in most recent times the white race, to its astonishment, was forced to learn that the question whether nature had preordained it as the ruler of the globe had, in fact, not yet been determined in its favor, but that the deciding battle in this respect has precisely only just commenced.”<sup>20</sup>

Evidently, these concerns echo the contemporary fears of the early Weimar Republic, but it is therefore all the more noteworthy that, once again, questions of the relation between the state and its power are redirected and articulated around instances of writing on the screen. The “battle” that is staged, then, takes place over the obstacles and impediments that might challenge any “preordained” legitimacy of power and is replaced as a question of “energy,” since von Wenk is only able to resist Mabuse’s attempts at incapacitating him through an exhausting effort of sheer will as he slumps forward into hypnotic sleep. When Lang invokes this in form of a colonialist struggle in the sequence as a cinematic replication, he nonetheless returns to this kind of thinking through a popular reimagination by framing it as a fundamental battle on a scale of destiny and providence in which race, civilization and the idea of nation converge. The letters “Tsi-Nan-Fu” thus project a struggle of territorial legitimacy within the realm of civilizations and return it to the gaming table as a manifestation of a mental confrontation between two adversaries. Tom Gunning describes this sequence merely in terms of its metacinematic

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 502. In the original: “Nirgends auf der Erde gibt es aber grundlegendere, tieferreichende Unterschiede und Gegensätze zwischen ... Rassen und Gesittungen als hier in Ostasien, wo die weiße Rasse erst in allerjüngster Zeit zu ihrem Erstaunen erfahren mußte, daß die Frage, ob sie von der Natur zur Beherrscherin des Globus bestimmt sei, tatsächlich noch gar nicht zu ihren Gunsten entschieden ist, sondern daß eben erst der entscheidende Kampf darum beginnt.”

meditation on the power of the cinematic apparatus itself and as an inventory display of the “devices of the cinema,” such as “lighting, framing, masking, editing, camera movement ... that have been associated with hypnotic power in this brief sequence.”<sup>21</sup> But the use of writing here suggests that the letters, nonsensical as they may sound, encapsulate an association with a particular national trauma, which, moreover, almost renders the representative of state authority impotent to act on its behalf. Mabuse’s hypnotic power at this moment rests on the capacity to induce a catatonic state of compliance in his victims who become his automata. For any other hypnosis sequence in the film, however, Mabuse is capable of inducing this loss of autonomy in consciousness primarily through his eyes, whose stare does not even need to be reciprocated in order to have its desired effect on his victims. The sphere of influence determined by his power is generally restricted to the territory of vision.

By contrast, this sequence offers a privileged moment for witnessing the source of Mabuse’s powers, since it equates the spectator’s point-of-view with that of the state attorney and, in doing so, demonstrates one of the points of vulnerability that are part of the range of tricks Mabuse employs to his advantage. With extraordinary effort, von Wenk is able to resist this attempt at hypnosis and Mabuse now encounters the potential limits of his powers for the first time. Mabuse is not aware of his counterpart’s identity at this point, but we know that it is the representative of the state who suffers in this struggle, expressed in the glow of the nominal letters that reveal one of the secret sources of Mabuse’s craft. Because the state attorney is investigating in official capacity, the writing on the screen serves a memento of his sacrifice. Gunning identifies a Langian fascination with the “connections between Mabuse’s gaze and the

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 110.

role of spectatorship,”<sup>22</sup> but any pleasure generated by the oscillation between an awareness of the apparatus and the illusions it may effect are vitiated through the appearance of writing. That is, part of Lang’s fascination here with the cinematic pleasure of depicting the act of hypnosis has to do with the fact that the effect the words have on von Wenk obviously do not have a reciprocal effect on the spectator. The letters represent the threat of hypnosis without actually causing it in the spectator. They are both cause of the hypnosis and yet remain a secondary, representative record of the effect. While the words are thus merely a trace of the physical coercion inflicted on the body of the representative of the state, they nonetheless function as an emblemized inscription of his suffering at the same time. The letters thus stand as a tribute for the physical and mental efforts on the attorney’s part to resist this coercion in the service of the civic good that he represents. This means, however, that the writing here offers a disciplinary correlative to the visual pleasure of substitution that Lang evokes. The state representative is subjected to Mabuse’s power and the writing documents this for us, but the price for the act of witnessing his suffering is rendered externally as a reminder in the seemingly nonsensical incantation of the phrase Tsi-Nan-Fu, made visible by inscription. Because of its status as a memento, the notions of guilt and atonement that this inscription invokes are revisited when the state attorney is subjected once again to hypnosis.

In a build-up to the climactic showdown when the state attorney finally recognizes his nemesis, von Wenk is told by the psychiatrist Dr. Mabuse about the phenomenon of hypnotic powers and is subsequently advised to visit a performance by the hypnotist Sandor Weltmann, Mabuse’s most spectacular impersonation, who, as a title announces, specializes in “experiments in mass suggestion, sleepless hypnosis, trance, natural magnetism, the secrets of the Indian

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

fakirs, the secrets of the psyche,” and “the subconscious in man and animal.” The invitation is intended as an elaborate trap to dispose of the state attorney. With a large and receptive audience in the auditorium, Weltmann’s opening experiment, as announced by a dialogue title, is a demonstration of a “typical case of mass suggestion such as is the power base of Hindu Fakirs.” In this associative chain the fear of alternative modes of power is projected onto the figure of the other, but returns as a projection itself for the supposed entertainment of the masses who are willing to submit to the power of the other. Weltmann conjures up images of a caravan across a desert landscape on the stage after the curtains have been raised. The audience is astonished and mesmerized to witness the mirage of the caravan move towards them, descend from the stage and enter the auditorium in a procession down the center aisle until Weltmann erases the illusion with an authoritative gesture of his hand grabbing the air, to take away the spectacle he has just suggested to the masses. This gesture is sinister in part because everything Weltmann does is performed with his left hand, while the sleeve of his right arm remains permanently buried in his coat pocket. The emphasis on the left hand might seem like a utilitarian visual shorthand to indicate Weltmann’s deviance and abnormality. When he writes letters with the instructions to be obeyed under hypnosis, the focus on the movements of the left hand subtly underscores this notion of deviance. Yet there is a more oblique level of significance to the missing right hand, because such an absence suggests a reference to World War I, given the ubiquity of maimed and wounded veterans of the war on the streets at the time. But Sandor Weltmann’s name indicates an absence of a specific nationally identifiable origin, since the pairing of the exoticized Austro-Hungarian first name with his last name, after all, suggests he is a “a man of the world” and therefore from no specific location or region. This is underscored visually by his menacing mane and beard which resemble those of a mendicant Fakir, juxtaposed with his elegant deportment as

a tuxedo-clad cosmopolitan – an emphasis that orchestrates paradoxical registers of a proto-fascist fascination with an exotic figure who possesses Aryan “Hindu” powers, but is nonetheless marked as a threatening, nomadic outsider, capable of shifting and adjusting to any environment, which would thus incorporate a paranoid anti-Semitism within his figure as well.

On the other hand, however, his wound is a visual reminder of a potential military sacrifice and as a memento he wears a military medal resembling the Iron Cross below his left lapel in his disguise, but since any determinate allegiance to the category of nation is called into question by the additional conflicting identifiable markers deployed here, he remains an enigmatic figure in and of itself. His appearance, then, obscures his essential characteristics to the unsuspecting observer and indicates Mabuse’s potential to employ symbolic markers such as wounds and medals, much as he is the manipulator of the filmic image itself, to his advantage. Because this is emphasized in a sequence which deals with the manipulation of the masses, it invokes issues of power and knowledge. Both the filmic and actual audiences are witnessing the power of the cinema itself to create illusions, but are at the mercy of the illusionist mechanisms that make this possible. We know that Mabuse is a manipulator of symbols and semblances, but are incapable of intervening in the process of their unfolding, which, after all, is the condition of the cinema itself. In other words, we have already been subjected to learn how to recognize the clues and signs that are associated with Mabuse’s manipulations, but the state attorney has not yet learned to recognize the signs as clues. The representative of the state is not yet capable of recognizing the manner in which destabilizing forces are undermining its foundations. In a reversal, then, the figure of authority that should act on behalf of the people is rendered powerless to understand the evidence of manipulation and will now be made to suffer.

Tom Gunning's focus on the metacinematic aspects of this sequence are therefore insightful in terms of the particular signature that traverses Lang's work, but through this focal point in attention certain fundamental issues of the state and suffering are obscured. Gunning describes the scene of the caravan as a "sort of super-cinema, appearing first on the curtain and then expanding into three dimensional haptic space."<sup>23</sup> He discusses the relevance of this sequence in terms of a conjunction of the film's actual audience with "Weltmann's mini-movie" in which the "*mise-en-abîme* of the audience perceiving and applauding ... becomes an emblem for the issues Lang raises about enunciation in this film."<sup>24</sup> The importance of this scene, according to Gunning, lies in the fact that it marks the epitome of Mabuse's power, insofar as it now extends to the cinematic apparatus itself, but that this is the moment at which Lang enacts a "dialectical reversal."<sup>25</sup> Since Mabuse's power has been characterized by his skill at "manipulating the 'empty' forms of modernity," such as "the disembedded co-ordination of space and time; the fluctuations of the money economy; and the gambler's surrender to the mechanics of desire,"<sup>26</sup> this power must now confront its counterpoint as a "visionary moment," a signature instance for a Langian filmic system in Gunning's explanatory model. For Gunning these constitute exemplary instances of recognition in Lang's films, which "trigger a moment of realisation and interpretation, a reading of signs, in which the true mechanism controlling reality is perceived by a character."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



This moment arrives for von Wenk when he avails himself to another of Weltmann's experiments. With his one hand, Weltmann writes down the actions the attorney will be made to perform, inserts the letter into an envelope, seals it, and hands it to another participant to hold for the duration of the experiment as the state attorney and two other participants stare at his actions intently and skeptically. Suddenly Weltmann pulls out a luminous crystal monocle and whispers the words "Tsi-Nan-Fu!" Von Wenk winces and gulps, as the phrase of the intertitle triggers a physical reaction from him through a kind of bodily memory of an unidentified trauma. A flashback returns us to their first encounter in the Palais Andalusia, but this time the scene is shown from the divergent perspective of a third-party observer to highlight the refracting sparkle of the square spectacles and Mabuse's slow and deliberate incantation of the phrase, again shown with an intertitle, while von Wenk's head is weighed down by the force of this interplay. Back on the stage, the confrontation is now structured by an exchange of gazes: von Wenk looks up in a shock of recognition and in a geometrically precise and seamless series of overlap-dissolves he sees a succession of faces from Weltmann, to Professor van den Gruich, and then to the psychiatrist Dr. Mabuse, whose faces all stay anchored and centered exactly on the screen by their piercing eyes until the dissolve to Mabuse's face escapes this vectorial grid of looking by slightly shifting the identical stare a few degrees above the position of the previous pairs of eyes. An intertitle shows the attorney's stammering attempt to vocalize his revelation: "Doctor ... Doctor Ma ... --- !" At this point the state attorney has finally recognized the eyes as the identifying characteristic that traces all the various personas he has encountered to one individual, but Mabuse as Weltmann looks at him even more fiercely so that von Wenk's eyes roll back into their sockets. He slumps into a hypnotic sleep, while Weltmann's hand gestures gently across his face as if to comfort and assure a sleeping child.

The act of recognition, in which Mabuse's eyes are briefly identified as the locus from where his power originates, reverses the mode of surveillance by which the state asserts its own supremacy over the process of identification of the individual. Tom Gunning has written on how photography as part of "new systems of identification" for criminology entered the popular imagination in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the transition to photographic records as a means for criminal evidence of identity from previous forms of identification, which "frequently depended upon a direct and visible mark applied by legal authorities to the criminal's body, the equivalent of the scriptural mark of Cain."<sup>28</sup> In this transition, Gunning notes, the "photograph acted as a 'new mark,' one which inscribed the deviant body with a socially defined individuality, an individuality which rested ultimately on its structural differentiation from all other recorded bodies."<sup>29</sup> Lang's film here takes recourse to this popular fascination with such a mode of control, but reverses the direction of its power. Now Mabuse is able to elude the individuating technique of recognition by the gaze of the state's representative and, in fact, uses his eyes, the part of the body that remains the most unalterable and the least accessible to a physical sense of self, to exert control over the state and render its official powerless and catatonic by pairing his gaze with the invocation of a trauma-inducing phrase. Through this process of reversibility, a mark will be inflicted on the vision of the state representative, while the sentences for his future have been spelled out in the letter that Weltmann has written. A title reveals that in the note Mabuse has scripted that von Wenk will leave the auditorium, enter a specific car waiting

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 20 – 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

outside, and drive “at full speed” into a quarry. The letter concludes with the mysterious command “Melior!”

Von Wenk mindlessly follows the commands spelled out in the note inside the envelope. He enters the car and drives off and the word “Melior” appears before him in jittery letters in mirror-reverse as a long shot of von Wenk in the driver’s seat behind the wheel and windshield reveals. A reverse point-of-view shot from behind his shoulder now reveals the word “melior” readable from left to right in front of him as the word that “drives” him and serves as the focal point of his direction. In an extreme long shot, the letters emanate from his car in the distance and move rhythmically sideways down the road to pull him forward in their direction. While Deleuze calls the film’s image sequences exemplary for the work of the action-image,<sup>30</sup> this moment marks an intriguing fusion of a sign within the image of movement. Expressed as a configuration of inner compulsion that is imposed from the outside, these two vectors of force merge in the signs and letters which are animated by them into an uncontrollable movement. The reassertion and redirection of where the force of this movement is headed becomes the dramatic impetus of the film. The writing on the screen, then, constitutes a literal figuration of the liminal constraints within which the body of the state representative is made to suffer. In most commentaries, however, that note the use of writing in the film, like that of “Tsi-Nan-Fu,” the word *melior* does not seem to have any connotations other than to indicate Mabuse’s ability to invest nonsensical terms with a mysterious force of meaning.

Along these lines, even Tom Gunning’s discussion of similar instances of superimposed writing in Lang’s films restricts itself to declare them “magical words” that express a kind of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 69.

“hypnotic power” or “hypnotic rhythm.”<sup>31</sup> But *melior* as the Latin comparative for the adjective *bonus*, which is defined as “good,” “kind,” “decent,” “useful,” “sound,” or “morally upright,” preserves echoes of a Latin incantation, beseeching improvement in an obsessive urge to make things “better.” In its homophonic qualities it furthermore suggests an affinity to the word *misereor*, a biblical term from the Latin phrase *misereor super turbam*, which means “I have pity on the multitude.”<sup>32</sup> In this form the term has a liturgical connotation that instrumentalizes the hypnotic qualities of incantation and directs it at von Wenk, who fixates on the word that drives him on. The word is no longer merely an aural hallucination but rather, as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, enters von Wenk’s field of vision by inscribing itself into the image. The criminal, that is, has managed to inflict a physical mark on the legal representative of the state and this infliction is spelled out and made visible for us on the screen. The disciplinary character of these moments of writing on the screen therefore emblemizes the suffering that the body of the state has to endure and invokes grandiose registers of scale by aligning itself with a biblical notion of representation in which the individual body is punished in the multitude’s stead. To underscore this point, von Wenk is rescued by his assistants who have chased after his speeding car and, shortly before he reaches the cliffs of the quarry, manage to pull him into their vehicle and lay him down, pietà-like, with his arms stretched out on either side.

In an early writing fragment from 1916, Walter Benjamin reflects on the difference between the sign (*Zeichen*) and the mark (*Mal*) and determines that the “sign is printed on

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<sup>31</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> In the Latin version of the Gospel of Mark, VIII, 2, this is what Jesus says upon seeing the crowd of hungry people when he performs his second miracle at the Sea of Galilee.

something, whereas the mark emerges from it,” since “the realm of the mark is the medium.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the sign, the mark “appears principally on living beings (Christ’s stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks)” and it is “always absolute and resembles nothing else in its manifestation.”<sup>34</sup> In the context of such a definition, we can understand the appearance of the mysterious words in the instances of writing on the screen in *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* as manifestations of marks rather than signs. They emerge through the body and remain physical in the sense that they indicate a bodily sensation of vision, yet they are externalized as absolute evidence of their indicative function, namely to point to the displacement of a general traumatic suffering onto the singular bodies of authority figures. This is also why they seem enigmatic or “magical” because what is important is that the words “resemble” their own manifestation rather than representing a particular point of reference in a chain of signification. The mark appears as a “sign” of pain inflicted onto the body of the figure of authority and becomes an indication of suffering. However, since the mark is “often a warning sign of guilt,” Benjamin continues, “it coincides with the sign (as in Belshazzar’s Feast), and the awful nature of the apparition is based in large part on uniting these two phenomena, something of which only God is capable.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the film mobilizes the spectacle of the apparition as a “warning sign of guilt,” but it is rendered here as a conflict of power staged between legitimate authority as represented by the state attorney and the nihilist manipulation of signs and symbols as exemplified by Mabuse in his various manifestations. But because the cinema itself can be said

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Painting, or Signs and Marks,” (1916), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913 – 1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

to partake in this inflationary system of circulating signs and symbols, made evident once more by Weltmann's metacinematic act of conjuring up the caravan, the question arises what ultimate sign could reinstitute a faith in what is made visible on the screen.

The translation of Benjamin's understanding of the confluence between mark and sign as "something of which only God is capable" is therefore slightly misleading in this respect. A more accurate translation of the passage would read that the "frightening nature of the apparition is based in large part on the fusion of these two figures, a power which can only be ascribed to God."<sup>36</sup> That is, the frightening admonition introduced by the unification of mark and sign does not so much rest on a divine capacity as such, but rather in the sudden appearance of a power that stands outside the temporal and the contingent and thus the appearance must be attributed to a higher power. This is why Benjamin works with the category of guilt, because the fusion of mark and sign serve as a memento or a disciplinary reminder of larger, timeless forces, so that "the resistance of the present between the past and the future is eliminated and these, magically fused, descend together on the head of the sinner."<sup>37</sup>

Given the pell-mell predilection of Fritz Lang and his collaborator at the time, screenwriter Thea von Harbou, for orchestrating and incorporating a diverse range of mythological, Orientalist and Christian narrative elements into their films such as *The Indian Tomb*, *The Nibelungen*, or *Metropolis*, it would not seem remarkable in the least that the film

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<sup>36</sup> In the original: "In diesem Sinne erscheint es [das Mal] aber zugleich mit dem Zeichen (Belsazar) und das Ungeheure der Erscheinung beruht zum großen Teil auf der nur Gott zuzuschreibenden Vereinigung dieser beiden Gebilde." Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, bk. 2, *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), p. 605.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Painting, or Signs and Marks," p. 84.

here employs an iconography that carries with it biblical associations, but the invocation of guilt in connection with the mark transcends the playful pastiche that generally characterizes Lang's ability to integrate a large range of discursive and iconic registers into his films. Instead, the *melior*-sequence articulates a disciplinary moment in which the idea of the social body is formed around a conceptualization of guilt. Spelled out on the screen in bold letters is the warning mark that indicates the suffering of the state representative on behalf of the larger collective good, but its appearance comes after the category of spectatorship has explicitly been raised.

For the diegetic audience that witnesses Weltmann's performance the pleasure of observation lies in the willingness to accede to a spectacle whereby a few among them will be potentially subjugated by a more powerful will. This assent is predicated on a wager or a leap of faith, in which the audience members accept that while the boundary between the will of their selves and the will of the other may be dissolved, they are indemnified from any actual harm by the preordained script written by Weltmann as well as the contextual obligation of the theatrical space itself to remain within the framework of mere performance. The disciplinary shift to the category of guilt occurs when the writing on the screen introduces a dimension of power that signals its exteriority from beyond any confines of the spectacle. The presence of the theatrical audience on the screen, who are oblivious to what they are witnessing in actuality and imagine it as amusement, is now superseded by a dramatic sequence in which the word *melior* haunts the state attorney, but whose physical suffering we as audience members share since we see the stigmata in his vision as well. The spectacle of illusions through which Lang's films often reflect on the nature of reflections, in other words, should not itself be dismissed as a mere diversion or a mere spectacle. The apparitions of the word *melior* then serve as a reminder that the force of the power we are witnessing is "real," even though it may have only been conjured up and

orchestrated as a spectacle on the screen. Guilt, then, is an affective response elicited from the sequence in the form of knowledge. As if to preempt and indict any potential dismissal by the audience that this is only a “film,” the writing indicates a shift to a different dimension of the struggle for control between Mabuse and the state attorney because it has moved beyond the confines of the theatrical space.

We know more than the audience in the film, because we know the real script that Weltmann has prepared for von Wenk to enact and yet we also know that we are powerless to intervene in the machinic force of the cinema as it unfolds before our eyes, even as we have seen an audience blinded by the illusions Weltmann has created for them. This form of powerlessness is replicated on the screen by the state attorney’s impotence to act despite having identified Mabuse’s face behind Weltmann’s mask. A collective pleasure in the willful ignorance that the diegetic audience of this spectacle had exhibited on the screen is extended here to the actual or potential audiences of the film itself. The category of guilt is invoked by suggesting that the suffering witnessed on the screen is in a sense being allowed to happen as a manifestation of the will of the spectators, who are themselves incapable of exerting a power of interference in the machinic trajectory of the images in movement. The scopic desire, then, to witness this spectacle of the humiliation of the state attorney is framed as a question of willful loss of will in the same moment of reversal that projects onto the other the orientalist fantasies of hypnotic modes of power and control, a “rear projection” which Mabuse obligingly produces. As a disciplinary instance of film-viewing the film reconfigures this loss as a willful submission which the writing on the screen amplifies.

This amplification extends in another way from the character to the spectator as well because of the fact that the use of writing imposes a position of acceptance that takes on the



semblance of reading. In contrast to “viewing” the film, the act of reading connotes a sense of subjectification because it introduces an awareness of self again. The viewing self is made subject because it is forced to read the signs on the screen in a Benjaminian moment of shock. From a projection outward as a manifestation of will, the writing turns this will back on itself to impose an involuntary act of reflection. The fact that this figuration of movement is rendered as an instance of hypnosis is ironic because the hypnotic condition within the film expressed as writing folds back onto the spectator as a literalized indexical point of reference. It indicates the limit point between a reading subject that recognizes the writing as a sign and a self that has been subjected to the power of signification and cannot escape this spell. This doubling figure carries with it a notion of witnessing in its juridical sense. The writing spells out the conditions of subjectification as a loss of will and at the same time relegates a responsibility to the viewer. Written on the screen is the command to witness what happens when the agents of authority are no longer capable of exerting it. In this respect, it is a visual correlation to the oath, a performative act that testifies to the solemn intentions of the speaker. Here the writing is a disciplinary act of imposition. At the moments when we witness a loss of agency in the representatives of authority, the asylum director in *Dr. Caligari* or the state attorney in *Dr. Mabuse*, who have been unleashed and let loose into the pure movement of will at the cost of the loss of self, the writing arrests itself in a figuration that spells out a demand to the spectator, that is, to witness what has been wrought.

The final confrontation of the film is rendered as a battle between two competing conceptions of the state, a legitimate use of force by the authorities under the control who are confronted with Mabuse’s absolutist declaration that he considers himself a sovereign entity. “I consider myself a state within a state with which I have been in battle for a long time” he

declares in an intertitle.<sup>38</sup> When he is confronted ultimately by the forces of the state, the military and the police under the command of the state attorney von Wenk, Mabuse descends into madness. Having challenged the legitimacy of the state, Mabuse finds himself in his forger's den, surrounded by all the documents with which he has imposed his control. An intertitle declares who this entity is by stating, "the man who had been Mabuse," and reveals him as stammering and incoherent, an invalid who can now be institutionalized. He has been stripped of his identity and the power that his name confers is no longer his.

The film that serves as a successor to this narrative begins with the death of Mabuse, whose power has now been transferred to a frenzy of inscriptions. The conflict is highlighted in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, a sound film that, with its 1933 release, coincided with the implementation of the Nazis' control over the German government and neatly bookends a history of Weimar cinema beginning with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Apart from their obvious similarity in the titular structure, both films invoke the figure of a director of an insane asylum who takes his orders from writing. By placing the director back in the asylum as a patient, Tom Gunning remarks, "Lang in effect restores the original ending to *Caligari*."<sup>39</sup> In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, it is a professor of psychiatry who becomes the recipient and medium of the commands of the catatonic arch villain Dr. Mabuse, who was an inmate of the professor's clinic. Mabuse has died, but his will lives on through his "testament," that is, through writing which exerts a hypnotic force for social disruptions and terror that Mabuse aspires to. The professor,

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<sup>38</sup> A more detailed discussion of the importance of this sequence is offered in Chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 148. See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion on the film's end, which was originally planned to end with the disturbing suggestion of the descent of the figure of authority into madness. By placing a narrative "framing device" at the end of the film, in which it is revealed that the entire film originated from the deluded mind of an inmate, the benevolent figure of authority is restored to his proper place.

Dr. Baum, channels Mabuse's commands through writing and, in turn, implements and disseminates them as a disembodied voice to a gang of criminals in order to bring down the structures of society and create a reign of terror. Against this fundamental threat, Inspector Lohmann wages a desperate fight, which involves the circulation of messages across various media.

In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* the intervention of the state is rendered as struggle for the control over these media, which culminates in a spectacle of decline of apocalyptic dimensions. Lucy Fischer demonstrates that the film is structured around linkages of "associational leaps"<sup>40</sup> rather than an overriding narrative or causal logic. In doing so, the film becomes a reflection on mediality and authoritarian control itself as willed into vision by the power of thought. Because of this conceptual structure of mental associations, the film fuses a conception of the filmic narration as a hypnotic act over the spectator with the associative force of the film, so that Lang himself emerges as the hypnotic Mabuse who seems to "'live' in the consciousness behind the camera eye."<sup>41</sup> This reliance on the fascination of mental power, Fischer notes, stands in stark contrast to Lang's avowed insistence that the film is an anti-fascist work.<sup>42</sup> Tom Gunning extends this argument separately by stating that the film's formal qualities display a "pattern of dispersal, as if searching for some figure that could command them, make them settle into a single association,"<sup>43</sup> so that the film's "narrative force remains disembodied,

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<sup>40</sup> Lucy Fischer, "Dr. Mabuse and Mr. Lang," *Wide Angle* 3, no. 3 (1979): 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 143.

... strongly sensed, but not tied to an enunciator character”<sup>44</sup> at first. Bringing this dispersive force into focus, Gunning continues, is Mabuse’s power that “infiltrates and contaminates”<sup>45</sup> as writing, which, in turn, encapsulates the way in which “Mabuse’s will-to-power migrates through his film, even after his death.”<sup>46</sup>

The inflationary proliferation of text in the film suggests that writing is the source of power, so that the battle the film poses as the solution for the defeat of Mabuse renders his antagonist, Inspector Lohmann, as a detective of a different order. While Inspector Lohmann is engaged in reading and deciphering clues, he stands in contradistinction to Mabuse’s ethereal force, which therefore stages a conflict between abstracted writing that can only be controlled by a different force, which is at the same time more archaic and more sophisticated. As Gunning puts it, “Lohmann’s undeniable corporeality contrasts with Mabuse’s mute and ultimately disembodied image.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, the ultimate clue that leads Lohmann to Mabuse is an inscription into a window pane that at first appears to be mere scratches on the glass. In the act of deciphering the scratches, a laboratory technician treats the scratches with ink, and then presses blotter paper onto it, so that the scratches become a form of intaglio engraving. The name that emerges from “scratch” is the stuttered, rebus-like utterance “Ma-bu.” The technician then manipulates the flat plane of the glass by turning and inverting it and thus demonstrates to Lohmann how the scratches were etched into the glass backwards and upside down in an act of desperation with a ring on a hand hidden behind a back against the window.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

Lucy Fischer notes the similarity between this sequence of decoding and the development of the film medium itself, since it strongly parallels “the procedure from printing an image from film,”<sup>48</sup> down to the chemical process and the procedure of lateral reversal and inverse shift required to “read a word etched into the emulsion of a film frame as it comes off a reel.”<sup>49</sup> Gunning notes that in this brief sequence, “Lang demonstrates the registers of the sign, from symbolic writing, to iconic reflection, all through the index of the trace.”<sup>50</sup> While the technician is capable of reproducing the circumstances of the inscription, it is still up to Lohmann to decipher its significance. The seemingly meaningless sound “Ma-bu” connects with the knowledge of his archival memory and he is able to identify that Mabuse “was the doctor from the inflation period.” In another associational leap, Lohmann pulls out the documents from the archive that contain the files of “Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler,” the title of Lang’s earlier film. The real ability to counteract the power of Mabuse, then, is linked to the control of technology in conjunction with an archival knowledge of the cinema itself. The metacinematic confluence between, in Fischer’s terms, the spectator decoding “the cinematic imagery”<sup>51</sup> and its reproduction of the filmic process of development is extended into the film itself with Lohmann as the reader in command of cinematic history.

This self-reflexive meditation on the medium is continued in a sequence in which Mabuse commands his minions as a disembodied voice from behind a curtain. In an ingenious cinematic construction, Kent, a reformed criminal who is trying to prevent his former partners

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<sup>48</sup> Lucy Fischer, “Dr. Mabuse and Mr. Lang,” p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 156.

<sup>51</sup> Lucy Fischer, “Dr. Mabuse and Mr. Lang,” p. 25.

from becoming Mabuse's instruments of terror, and his lover Lily, find themselves in the room from which Mabuse issues his commands. Kent shoots at the curtain from behind which the voice emerges and the room goes dark. They both tear down the curtain and, as Michel Chion puts it, "appear before us, stupefied by what they see before them."<sup>52</sup> In a disorienting reversal, Kent and Lily, in shock, are shown standing on the screen as if they are looking out into the audience, "as if they were discovering reality – the movie theater and its audience."<sup>53</sup> A reverse shot of what they see follows and it is revealed that it is a simulacrum consisting of a cardboard silhouette cut-out and a loudspeaker. This is what is "behind the curtain" or the screen for audiences as well, a two-dimensional simulacrum that produces the illusion of depth and a technology of reproduction. The machinery that makes the illusion possible has been exposed and reveals its own status as a simulacrum, "as well as to the situation of spectatorship [and] to film itself as a simulation."<sup>54</sup> The voice as such, however, remains unlocalizable and this force points to Mabuse's machinic source of power as a phantom, since, as Chion puts it, "if there is a Mabuse, he is in this name without an identity, this body without a voice, this voice without a place."<sup>55</sup> In an extension of the cinematic terms of Chion, this power cannot be countered purely by a knowledge of the medium or the technology.

Chion identifies the power of the voice as an "acousmachine that occupies no-place"<sup>56</sup> and which exerts its control "by tele-hypnosis, or hypnosis at a distance."<sup>57</sup> The recourse to the

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<sup>52</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in the Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36 – 37.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

voice without a body in the cinema, then, indicates for Chion the presence of the dead, and, he notes, ever “since the technological capacity of the telephone and gramophone made it possible to isolate voices from the bodies, the voice... has reminded us of the voice of the dead.”<sup>58</sup> This ethereal presence that at the same time is characterized by the absence of a body needs a different kind of force to counteract its control. It is therefore no accident that the figure of Lohmann, played by Otto Wernicke, is characterized by an excessive corporeality and physical presence.<sup>59</sup> His hefty physicality was already pronounced in *M*, the film in which the Falstaffian Lohmann made his first appearance as a figure of the law. His ability to excel in investigate work in both films is evident less in analytical skills than by his coercive and authoritarian manner and his insistence to seek out physical proximity with criminals. His mode of deducing knowledge from clues is always accompanied by the pleasure he derives from smoking his cigars and he derives his authority largely through his physical weight. In this dichotomy the abstracted voice of manipulation that circulates through writing finds its opposite in a baroque conception of authority, that is, in the figure of the state as a corporeal presence whose authority is anchored in his body. This figuration of power was frequently embodied by the actor Emil Jannings, most notably in the 1941 Nazi film *Ohm Krüger*.<sup>60</sup>

Even though Lohmann is ultimately victorious in identifying the locus of Mabuse’s power as the haunting presence in the media he commands, he can only witness the destruction

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Lang based the character of Inspector Lohmann on Ernst Gennat (1880 – 1939), a famous detective of the Weimar Berlin police force who was known as “the Buddha of law enforcement” due to his obese stature and who became a media celebrity because of his involvement in a number of high-profile murder cases.

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion.

of a chemical factory with which the film celebrates the movements of chaos and force it has unleashed. Fritz Lang's *M* of 1931, by contrast, offers a lengthy treatise on the pervasive ubiquity of writing within the social sphere and points to a different conception of citizenship in relation to the power of the state. In fact, the film stages itself as movement emanating from writing from the outset with its title. Following the production company logo Nero-Film and the title "A Fritz Lang Film," which is acoustically underlined by an ominous bell sound, the opening image of the film consists of an abstracted white letter M on a black screen.<sup>61</sup> Already with its one-letter title, the film situates itself as a textual riddle. The significance and meaning of the enigmatic title is far from self-explanatory and relegated to the film's subsequent unfolding of the narrative as a temporal deferment. If one of the textual functions a film title carries with it is to promise a fulfillment of the spectator's desire to achieve a coherent framework from which to understand the filmic text in its entirety, then the title here already indicates the importance of the clues that the letter "M" must yield for us and thus points to the larger functions that writing will occupy within the filmic text. Reduced to a single letter, a fragment of an impending puzzle, the title plays with the precarious status of the letter itself: at once categorical as a reduction to an abstract archive, with a vast indexical range of possible meanings subsumed under the rubric of

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<sup>61</sup> Given the precarious nature of a film's first few frames due to fraying because of circulation and editing for international distribution, there are a number of different accounts for this title sequence. In the restored, definitive version assembled by the Munich Filmmuseum in 1996 a stylized image of a poster for the film, a drawing of a right hand resembling a claw onto which a black painted letter "M" has been drawn in broad strokes, is used as the title. Nicholas Garnham in his *M: A Film by Fritz Lang* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 4, notes that that the film begins with a white letter "M" on the black screen. Reproductions of third title sequence version are given in Thierry Kuntzel, "The Film-Work," in *Enclitic* 2, no. 1 (spring 1978): 38. Here the title shows an expressionist shadow image of a human figure over which an edgy white letter "M" gradually appears.



the perhaps ominously foreboding thirteenth letter of the alphabet and with its corresponding radical absence of any concrete semantic signification, the letter *as* letter opens up the initial question of how writing will relate to the determination of meaning in this film.

With this framework we already encounter a metonymic structure of a larger set of issues that the film will propose. This corresponds to what Thierry Kuntzel calls a “micro-narrative,” which already encapsulates crucial themes to which the film will surreptitiously return as “figuration.”<sup>62</sup> In his structural analysis of the opening sequence, Kuntzel determines that the filmic syntagmatic opening serves as the figuration of a subsequent larger legibility of the entire film’s semiotic structure. A child’s voice bridges the extra-diegetic space of the title with the diegesis of the film. As the film fades in to depict a circle of children, we have already heard a voice beginning to recite a macabre “ring-around-the-rosie” nursery rhyme about waiting for a “black man with his little cleaver who is going to make mincemeat out of you.”<sup>63</sup> With the rhyme’s emphasis on waiting for an inevitable event (“wait, just you wait for a little while...”), Kuntzel regards this opening scene as indicative for the overall structure of the film. “Readable as a restitution of the film,” he states, the circularity of the arrangement of the children and the call to wait serves as the “pre-interpretation” for the subsequent lexical unfolding of the film’s narrational codes.<sup>64</sup> Rendered enigmatically, the hermeneutic decodings embedded in the opening sequence relate back to the question that the film’s title already indicates. “Why ‘M,’” asks Kuntzel, in order then to conclude that “the letter belongs, as an initial, to a double textual

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<sup>62</sup> Thierry Kuntzel, “The Film-Work,” p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Translation mine. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the film will follow the translation of Nicholas Garnham, *M: A Film by Fritz Lang*.

<sup>64</sup> Kuntzel, p. 41.

network: diachronically, to the M(abuse) series in Lang's oeuvre," and, "within the film's graphic materiality" it refers across a larger textual register, including the "symbolics" of a Baroque *Menschenalphabet*, where the letter "M is represented by opened legs" as a literalization of sexual phantasies which will be put into play in the film.<sup>65</sup>

While this can be described as a performative explication of the excessive level of meaning that the film's form gives rise to, it nonetheless indicates how much hermeneutic labor the film posits from the outset. In this regard, the film solicits the viewer as a "reader" who, summoned by the bell that accompanies the letter, must decipher the coded fragments of textual material that are set into motion at the outset of the film. Kuntzel then moves to the famous moment in which the compositional structure of the images signifies the murderer's first appearance. At a round billboard – the ubiquitous Berlin *Litfaßsäulen* – the child Elsie Beckmann, returning home from school, has stopped to throw her ball and let it bounce off a poster which reads "10,000 Marks Reward – Who is the Murderer?" As Elsie's ball bounces off the poster, a dark shadow of a man in a hat falls across the writing on the pillar. Disembodied as a ghost-like shadow the man begins to speak to the naïve Elsie. Here, as Kuntzel argues, we are confronted with a "single visual motif of a series of signs of menace, by reference to the referential code of German 'expressionist' cinema, and, anaphorically in the narrative, to the 'Black Man' of the rhyme – a double reference over which is laid the redundant inscription of the word *Mörder* underneath the shadow itself."<sup>66</sup> Since Kuntzel is more interested in the symbolic codes that are at work in this scene, he does not emphasize the literal inscription that the images offer here. Rather, he sees this literality as "redundant."

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Indeed, there is a deeper structural relation between image and letters in place here. Presumably, Elsie Beckmann, as a pupil coming from school, is not yet literate enough to read the significance of the warning that the poster proclaims. While she might be able to discern the letters or organize them into a sequence of words, she fails to understand the referential quality of the writing. The hermeneutic act of discerning meaning here is instead relegated back to the viewer, who, as a viewer, becomes a “seeing” reader but one who is powerless to intervene. We read the significance of the scene while at the same time image and word converge into a composite image: the ominous shadow is inscribed or supratitled as “murderer.” What is materially visualized, then, is the “spirit” of the letters, which, in form of the abstract “shadowy” disembodiment, returns on the screen as a surface convergence between image and text.

This is one of the foundational principles with which *M* organizes a textual imagery beyond its inherent narrative functions and thus exemplifies and *visualizes* what Jacques Derrida has termed *écriture*, the system of “writing” that inscribes any “movements of language” not only in its “system of notation” but also as “the essence and the content of these activities themselves.”<sup>67</sup> Noteworthy here, then, is the fact that *M* not only visualizes this ideational thought process already, but that it furthermore proposes writing in this film as an organizing system that drives both the narrative, thus functioning as a textual element, and that it at the same time offers itself as a metatextual folding or convergence of “textual images” into a treatise on the status of writing in its mode of textuality as such. This oscillating pattern, however, corresponds to the way in which writing allegorizes its own process.

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 9.

This complex doubling operation is consequently picked up in a sequence that is designed to exemplify the grid of panic and fear that has swept the city of four-and-a-half million people. The representation of Elsie's murder has been metonymically substituted through a scene in which the balloon figure that the murderer has bought her rises up, briefly ensnaring itself in telephone wires and then disappearing in the sky. As the grotesque balloon figure balances listlessly in the wires, it becomes a crude reference to the soul or *animus* of Elsie Beckmann that in its literally "gaseous state" returns to merge with the air in the sky. As Anton Kaes puts it, in this film "[s]ound affirms presence and life; silence connotes absence and death."<sup>68</sup> But we need to add another dimension to this parallel equation, namely the movement between sound and silence as it is evoked between writing and allegorization. In this metonymic substitution the scene points to its own inability for representation as it allegorizes the agony of a child's death through a balloon trapped in electric wires. As if to counterpose the force of this mode of representation, the film immediately renders this horrific event in writing. What the film stages, then, is the dramatic spectacle of how allegorization generates a frenzy of writing. For this, a three-fold line of textual writing in action is introduced. Firstly, the balloon scene is immediately followed by an increasing number of newspaper boys who populate the streets and summon the public's interest with their agitated screaming and repeating the initial question "Extra! Extra! Who is the murderer?"

This sequence is matched then with the camera tracking in on the murderer, identified through the "Peer Gynt" tune that he has been whistling during the murder sequence, as he is writing at a window-sill. The camera closes in over his shoulder until we see him writing in manic childish scribbles that, "since the police haven't published my first letter, I am writing

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<sup>68</sup> Anton Kaes, *M* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 13.

today straight to the newspapers. Keep up your investigations. Everything will happen just as I have predicted. But I haven't yet finished." This moment is crucial in two regards. For one, it renders the murderer compulsive through the way in which he writes this letter. At the same time, however, it suggests a degree of calculation which reflects his desire to both control and predict his actions as well as his corresponding urge to participate and intervene in the public discourse generated around him. The murders themselves have to be subsequently "signed" or authorized by the murderer through writing. The public event, that is, which the murders have already become through the writing in newspapers and posters must be repeated as a kind of double publishing: the representation of the murders in writing and the demand for a presentation of the murderer's words in writing.

In this sense, the film opens up another question that it cannot answer at the end. For how are we to account for the murderer's desire to write, i.e. presumably to reflect and represent temporally after the event of the murders? Since the murderer at the end confesses in the "kangaroo court," which the criminals have set up to pronounce justice over him, that he cannot control his urges, that he becomes a separate person in his lust to kill, we must regard the urge to write as a part of his *doppelgänger*. The writing we see, then, is the doubled and detached writing of a death-drive. It is driven by the desire to reenact the killings through written representation and by the irrational impulse to leave literal traces, written clues that will render the spirit of the murderer present and manifest for the police to decode, decrypt and decipher.

The "spirit," therefore, of Elsie, the spirit of the killer's drives and the "evil spirit" of the deed itself must all be represented in writing so as to either put an end to this continuous chain or repeat it endlessly through writing. Hence the film introduces another poster pronouncing the same event – murder! – albeit in this case the poster differs marginally from the first one, since it

now includes the name of Elsie Beckmann as well. An outraged crowd, of which the spectator is part since the camera mingles with the field of vision of the mass, gathers around the billboard. Reading the announcement's text, the voice that is reading the poster out loud becomes disembodied and mobilized as free-floating speech and attaches itself to various scenes into which the writing as speech is craftily woven. Strains of the writing become part of the public discourse of innuendo, rumor and anxiety that organizes the public sphere.<sup>69</sup> In Gilles Deleuze's terms, "the indeterminate speech-act" of the rumor here becomes autonomous so that it structures and conditions the regulation of the public.<sup>70</sup> This is fundamentally characteristic of a convergence between image and speech, he continues, in the "talkie," where "the division" of the silent cinema "between the visible image and the readable speech" is superseded by "something new," since "the visible image, denaturalized, begins to become readable in turn, *as* something visible or visual."<sup>71</sup> This, in turn, denotes an important shift in which the filmic images become readable and corresponds precisely to the complex duality - image as writing and writing as image - that folds itself out and back into the text of *M*. The sphere of writing, then, that *M* mobilizes, solicits the spectator as a "reader" who is forced to gather the clues provided on the screen and render them legible.

To underscore the social force of this shift, the next instance of writing in the film occurs during a scene in which the panic in the city has spread so pervasively that innocent citizens are accosted by angry mobs. A harmless bespectacled man has been found talking to a little girl and

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<sup>69</sup> The disembodied voice ends up at a *Stammtisch* in a bar, and by this time the voice has become a reader of the newspaper account to his fellow bar patrons congregated at the table.

<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 228.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

soon an outraged mass, assuming they have caught the murderer in the act, has gathered around him yelling for the police. At this moment, a double-decker bus, on which there is a similar commotion, appears and a pick-pocket is taken down the stairs by a constable, while the crowd eagerly motions the constable to arrest the old gentleman. The staircase of the bus is adorned by a huge display of advertising copy that writes the American chewing-gum brand “Wrigley’s” into the screen. While this is in and of itself an instance in which the viewing of the film becomes split up or ruptured into two separate levels of temporality as we read the writing and follow the course of action simultaneously,<sup>72</sup> the moment of the advertisement insists on a sense of verisimilitude in the reproduction of the ubiquity of written signs that traverse the public sphere in general.<sup>73</sup> The effect, then, is to verify and amplify the enigmatic character of signs as part of the public sphere. They may seem transparent like a Wrigley’s advertisement, but they are put into the service of establishing a spectator who is asked to participate in the decoding of signs in the same manner that the members of the public are shown to be eager participants in the search for the murderer. Nonetheless, this moment underscores the necessity to demonstrate how the mode of deciphering must be connected to the representatives of authority. The fact that the

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<sup>72</sup> For a larger discussion of the ramifications of this mode of film-viewing, cf. Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>73</sup> Wrigley’s advertisements, in general, stood as the epitome of Americanization and modernization that Weimar Berlin experienced at the time as a “barrage” assaulting the public eye: “The big city becomes a battleground on which the public, with its necessarily weakened nerves, succumbs in accord with the proven expectations of the billboard Hindenburgs,” writes Ernst Lorys on the Wrigley’s Chewing Gum billboards in 1926. As if Lang was aware of this polemic, he incorporated it into the production design of the film. Reprinted as “The Hour of the Chewing Gum,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 662 – 663.

actions of an innocent man have been misread as the clues that point to the murderer now indicate even more clearly that the terrain of the social sphere needs to be read and deciphered properly.

Thus the function of writing in film that has surfaced here in its phenomenon as a reproduction of general signs is immediately subsumed again into the visualization of the writing that is mobilized around the murders. The by-then published facsimile of the murderer's letter creates an even more frenetic police investigation, which is depicted as another montage sequence of links between writing and action. A heated telephone conversation between the Minister and the Chief of Police on the futility of the police-work thus far is visually underscored by close-ups of the murderer's handwriting, followed by a close-up of archived fingerprints. The minute fingerprints on the index card are then visually transformed into a huge slide-projection of one particular print. What is achieved here is a significant doubling effect where the projection of the print fills the entire screen and thus becomes spatially another filmic screen against which a shadow image of a spectator is imposed in outline. This "spectator" stand-in, as a metonymy, however, is far from passive or disengaged, as it is the silhouette of a detective who attempts to find clues in the print traces blown up to gigantic proportions. The question of scale is invoked here once again. The traces of the individual handwriting have already been archived within the magnitude of the bureaucratic system of control and they lie latent in it as the clues awaiting their incipient deciphering by the proper reader. Within the full-scale screen image the missing links lie dormant anticipating the moment that will enable a writer to be identified with writing that circulates anonymously up to this point.

This instance becomes representative for the textual detective work that is emphatically doubled as the spectator becomes replicated onto the screen. At this point the film emblemizes



the counterpart to writing, that is, the act of deciphering and decoding, or, more succinctly, the act of reading. This moment of substitution, therefore, posits a technological and bureaucratic apparatus for deciphering represented by the anonymous yet meticulous agents of the state at work for the social body. The anonymous writer necessitates a corresponding anonymous reader from within the bureaucratic system. In contrast to the emergence of the state at the end of *Kameradschaft*, with its allegorical sense of inevitability, the state is present here already in a perpetual state of emergency. The problem, however, has been the efficacy of this sense of urgency thus far, because it has not been channeled productively yet. The moment of metonymy, therefore, in which the spectator is visually integrated into the screen like the silhouette of an actual audience member blocking the light beams emanating from the projector, is connected to a sense of submission. The enormity of the scale provides an image for the structure of the social order that is already in place. Once the microscopic scale of the fingerprint traces has been transposed into its new dimension of magnitude it is also no longer recognizable as either a human or a letter. Instead, it has become biometric and textual information to be deciphered. The individual human that is mobilized and solicited is equated with an agent of the state because the screen images here replicate the gesture of mobilization that the posters have introduced in the opening sequence of the film.

What becomes legible here as a visual spectacle is a submission to the minute and efficient operations of the state as the reading of the material traces of the print which is assisted by a graphological analysis, where an expert is dictating the results of his findings. Writing on writing is transformed into speech, as the graphologist registers the minutiae of how the graphic traces of the killer's writing of the word "ball" indicate his "indolence" and "sexual

pathology.”<sup>74</sup> The theme of the minutiae of writing as the potential hinge from which all clues might fall into perspective, analogous to a rebus or cryptography which can be deciphered once the key to the textual matrix has been discovered, is then continued as a close-up reveals a policeman’s hand carefully opening a piece of paper labeled “Confiserie” with a set of tweezers. Once more, this act of visualized “reading” for answers is rendered futile and deferred, since the material traces of the paper only consist of sugar crumbs. Yet, the monadic or atomistic sugar crumbs have a ripple effect of incredible magnitude: from the location of their discovery a compass draws ever-widening circles onto a map of Berlin, suggesting the enormous levels of scale that the killer’s handwriting, both in its material content and in its consequences, involves. What we witness here are the multifaceted dimensions of writing as it traverses the social space and as it is registered graphically in the tiniest letter details to the gigantic traces of a measuring instrument across the cartographic grid of the city. Both registers of scale converge on the screen and are rendered equivalent in order to emphasize the difficulty of organizing this space as legible and as intelligible.

By this time, both the police and the criminal underworld have taken it upon themselves to arrest, in all senses of the word, this chaos of movement and mobilization that has been activated. In a sequence that demonstrates the pervasive disturbance and rupture of the “legitimate” criminal activities a raid is staged on the *Krokodil* speakeasy. Here we also

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<sup>74</sup> Viewers who adhere to classical cinematic conventions of realism might be quick to point out a careless continuity gaffe here, since the word “ball” is not part of the writing that has been reproduced on the screen. Such absence of explanation notwithstanding, it is certainly plausible within a realistic code to assume that the graphologist is clinically examining the killer’s first writing to the police. Yet this moment is nonetheless slightly dubious on a temporal level, because it constitutes a reference to Elsie’s ball, which would then situate the writing as having occurred *after* the initial letters.

encounter Inspector Lohmann, who will become the figure that embodies state power in its legal variant. The assorted criminals are rounded up and one by one they have to run the gauntlet for Lohmann, who shows the facility and skill of his practice of reading clues, modes of behavior, and suspicious patterns. An identity card of a self-confident criminal is easily exposed by Lohmann as a fraudulent, forged document when he shatters the ostensible confidence the criminal has bestowed upon this work of criminal craftsmanship, asserting his superiority in detective work. Likewise, he manages to pull out an incriminating newspaper page hidden in another criminal's furcoat. As Lohmann portentously unfolds the newspaper, a headline begins to form briefly, spelling "MOR..." which might alert the German spectator to the word for "murder" (*Mord*), but this expectation is frustrated in a visual pun as the letters form the newspaper's name *Morgenpost*. Nonetheless, the newspaper yields an incriminating clue. While it situates the diegetic time, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1930, it betrays the fur-clad criminal since an illustrated article on an "unsolved burglary into a fur shop" has surreptitiously been circled in pencil, condemning him to a visit to the "Alex," the police headquarters at the Alexanderplatz that was commonly known as the *Alex*.

The raid sets the stage for another large and justifiably famous montage sequence in which both the leaders of the crime syndicates (*Ringvereine*) and the assorted brass of the various branches of law enforcement unite simultaneously, having exhausted all possible methods of finding the identity of the murderer. The leader of the criminals, Schränker, who might be termed the "illegal" but nonetheless legitimate variant of state power, decides at this point that it is up to the criminals to catch the murderer. By this time the head of the con-artists has graphically substituted the question mark to the haunting question of identity by arranging empty nutshells on the table so as to form a large question-mark. This graphic inscription is

delegated in a crosscutting to the Chief of Police who concludes his description of the procedural work thus far with a resignation of “and then, yes then, the big question mark arises...” Both Lohmann and Schränker, independently but simultaneously, at this point come up with the way in which their respective method of hunting down the murderer is to be continued, thus aligning the force of the law with the force of the lawless and legitimating both as part of the public sphere that has been defined and delineated by the ultimate other, the child murderer. Schränker announces the utilization of the beggars as the surveillance network already in place on the Berlin streets, while Lohmann plans to rely on the surveillance network that is manifest in the archives and documents of psychiatry.

We move from this pivotal point of the establishment of an identical equation between crime and the law to another sequence that enacts this connection. The beggars are shown in their headquarters as comprising a semi-respectable organization, complete with its own stock market (“Hausse in Blutwurst”- “rise in blood sausage shares” announces a beggar’s “trader” as he jots down the current stock indices of the sandwich-trade on a large blackboard) and the organizational skill to superimpose a surveillance grid over every area of the city. A filing system into which is carefully registered every assigned position of the beggar’s zone of surveillance will be visually complemented by a sequence in which Lohmann inspects the archives of mental institutions, when the close-ups of the pieces of documents again structure a visual correspondence between the spectator’s visual absorption of the writing as images that coincide with Lohmann’s reading of the documentation of patient data. But this visual bridge frames a sequence in which we first witness how the beggar’s surveillance is put into place. During this sequence, where the camera follows the perspective of a supposedly “blind” beggar, we see a poster for the G.W. Pabst film *Westfront 1918* (Germany 1930). This is momentarily

crosscut with another equation of the spectator's perspective with that of the reading Lohmann, who by this time is proof-reading and pondering over a typed police report which emphasizes, in writing, the necessity to establish the place from where the murderer's writing has originated. Of these two fleeting moments of intra- and intertextuality, the film poster instance, apart from its evident registers of verisimilitude, contemporaneity and authenticity, serves Anton Kaes to develop a "new reading of the film *M* as a war film," which narrativizes "a city in a state of total mobilization prepared to fight the enemy, who takes on the form of an invisible serial murderer."<sup>75</sup> While Kaes is interested primarily in the "disintegration of the city's social space" and its relation to Weimar modernity as it informs the film,<sup>76</sup> his approach is instrumental in delineating seemingly insignificant aspects of the writing in film that serve to yield the problematics of a larger set of crucial textual issues articulated in the field of vision that the filmic writing establishes.

Very much in accordance with the intertextual connection between film and social reality as pointed to by the film poster within the film – one could indeed very well make the argument that a large number of the outcast beggar characters have become beggars as a direct result of the devastating effects of World War I – we now encounter the murderer openly in the anonymous public sphere as he absent-mindedly views the window display of a cutlery shop and eats an apple. During this scene a police detective is searching through the apartment of one Hans Beckert, a name that is on a list in his notebook yielded by the patients' files. We recognize the apartment as the scene of the letter writing as the plainclothes detective rummages through the

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<sup>75</sup> Anton Kaes, "The Cold Gaze: Notes on Mobilization and Modernity," *New German Critique* 59 (spring – summer 1993): 105.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

wastepaper basket to assemble pieces of evidence – a postcard, an empty cigarette pack, and a cigar brochure. The anonymous but haunting face of the murderer has thus been given a name and, as if to underscore the framing that the establishing of identity between name and face achieves, we see Beckert as the murderer framed by the reflection of a geometrical diamond-shape arrangement of knives through the window of the shop. His gaze upon the commodities displayed becomes transfixed and the camera perspective now cuts to his view of the shop window. Beckert notices a little girl, equally framed by the diamond pattern, as an image reflected in the window. His eyes bulge into a hypnotized stare.

While this sequence has been frequently described for its formal cinematic ingenuity, the visual construction explicitly constructs a conjuncture between the image as commodity-desire reflected in the shop window and the understanding of the image-commodity here as the hollowed-out fetish that seizes hold of the flâneur according to the terms that Walter Benjamin describes in his *Arcades Project*.<sup>77</sup> The constellation that the geometrical arrangement of the image of the girl and its reflection inscribe upon the eyes of Beckert cause him to follow her in a hypnotic spell. This transformation is further emphasized by another window display, notably a bookstore, where a perpetually moving circle as a spiral design draws the spectator's and the flâneur's eyes into its vortex. Next to the hypnotic spiral is a huge phallic arrow that rhythmically pounds its directional vector towards a book in the display as the shrill whistling that signifies the appearance of the murderer is heard again. As Beckert is magnetically drawn to the image arrangement of spiral vortex, moving arrow and the little girl framed as the animate

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), especially "Part II, 4 – Mythic History: Fetish," pp. 78 – 110, and *passim*. A symbolic reading of the connotations here is offered in Lotte Eisner, *Fritz Lang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 117.

object of his desire between these two inanimate objects, his spell is suddenly interrupted and broken by the appearance of the girl's mother who sternly warns her against such careless and unsupervised wanderings on the street as the girl has left the designated meeting point and unwittingly has become one with the elusive commodities that organize the optical field of desire of Beckert's gaze.

This powerful construction initiates a swift narrative response in which the unleashed scopical drive of the killer, witnessed and experienced by the spectator's gaze in a double moment of perspectival identification and detached observation, needs to be contained and immobilized. This opens yet another parallel montage between the underworld and the law.<sup>78</sup> Inspector Lohmann, who is informed by the detective assistant of his findings in Beckert's apartment, listens intently to the clues that have been yielded, when he suddenly interrupts the assistant. Here Lohmann's remarkable skills of memory and profound knowledge of the archive that has been assembled around the murders, allow him to establish a connection between the name of the cigarette brand found in Beckert's apartment and the clues found at a crime scene. Deductive logic by virtue of reason leads him to identify the name "Ariston." The moment when Lohmann pensively spells out the word with his fingers marks the occasion when the identity of the murder

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<sup>78</sup> The political implications of the repetition of this parallel construction are noteworthy. Thomas Plummer, for example, sees this as indicative for the film's profoundly ambiguous stance: "One cannot be certain whether the film implies that organized crime plays a constructive role in society" or whether the film "suggests an unbridgeable gap between social classes with little hope for integration." Such ambiguities, he argues, are ultimately left hanging in a sense of "aloofness" from the political status quo and therefore might be representative of the compromise Weimar political position of a *Vernunftrepublikaner* ("republican by virtue of reason"). Cf. Thomas G. Plummer, "M," in Thomas G. Plummer, Bruce A. Murray, and Linda Schulte-Sasse, eds., *Film and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), pp. 79 – 80.

has been procedurally determined by the inspector's ingenious decoding skills. Significantly, Beckert is conversely exposed as the murderer by intuitive chance. The blind beggar, a Tiresias-like figure who sells balloons, marked himself as afflicted by a sign around his neck, recognizes the pathological whistling of Beckert. It is thus sound, as proto- or crypto-speech, that ultimately betrays Beckert, but it is equally the archival writing that enables Lohmann finally to assemble all the diverse clues into a coherent textual framework to be read with ease and facility. Accidental sound and archival knowledge, as well as deductive logic and intuitive divination, constitute the all-encompassing framework which finally enables the identification of the murderer.

The traces of Beckert's own writing are uncovered as a scientific verification of Lohmann's logic. In the reflection of his window, which as a motif itself is indicative of the movie screen, the sub-textual traces of Beckert's handwriting are discovered and analyzed, replete with the seemingly indestructible material traces of his writing in the form of pencil dust. The materiality of this incriminating evidence is echoed in the material sign that a beggar's hand then imprints on Beckert's shoulder. The chalkmark "M" identifies him for all to see or to "read": he personifies the convergence between signifier "M" and signified "murderer," through which he, in turn, becomes the "floating signifier" in the filmic space that attempts to escape its arrest. Yet at the same time, as Kaes puts it, the multivalent sign "M" now "condenses previous markings and stigmatizes Beckert," so that he "becomes trapped in a bureaucratic system that disciplines by labelling."<sup>79</sup>

This hunt for the containment and immobilization of that which cannot be contained in the textual economy of the film and the social sphere of the diegesis sets up another line of

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<sup>79</sup> Anton Kaes, *M*, p. 63.



suspense when Beckert is captured in an office-building by the criminals and transported to an abandoned factory in which he is to be condemned by a “kangaroo court” of the criminals’ collective, who want to take the law into their own hands. Juxtaposed with another instance of inspector Lohmann reading, this time a report of the bizarre and not yet procedurally comprehensible break-in into the office building by a gang of criminals, it becomes a matter of time whether the common law of the legal system or the “natural” law of the criminals will prevail. Beckert is placed in front of the assorted criminals who demand that he be executed, according to the “natural law of mothers,” for his crimes of passion that go against their norm of crime as an economic enterprise. Here, the film sets up a precarious balance between the justice as personified by the “common-sense” law of the criminals and justice as abstract in the form of the legal apparatus. While Beckert’s “appointed” defense counsel points to the fact that his very compulsion exonerates him from any responsibility as a sick man who must be placed under the protective custody of the state, the criminals deride this as another instance of the failure of the legal system, which would invariably unleash a “vicious cycle” of the “paragraph 51.” This paragraph in the legal code that denotes *Unzurechnungsfähigkeit*, literally “non-accountability” by reasons of insanity, they argue, would only postpone justice until Beckert escapes or is liberated by an act of amnesty and the entire circle of killings would begin anew.

In this sense, the precarious state of judgment or closure is put into question. For it is here where the very question of “accountability,” judgment, and the final and unequivocal arresting of meaning, where action, result, and consequences of Beckert’s crimes merge with the problematics of writing in the film and thus brings back the question in regard to the status of writing. What is articulated in the vehemence with which the criminals reject the defense counsel’s argument is, beyond the narrative code, the desire to bring to a halt the “vicious”

nature of the hermeneutic circle, to once and for all put a stop to the dangerous oscillation between writing and meaning that allows for uncertainty and deferment of a final “reading” of a sentencing. Beckert is the uncontainable element that personifies, and therefore allegorizes, that trace which disturbs the easy convergence of text and definitive meaning.

He thus becomes the Derridean trace which is always virally embodied in any form of writing, suppressed by a rational desire for reason and immobile and stabilized meaning. Only the sudden appearance of the law in the form of the police can temporarily halt this cyclical movement. As such, the “organic representation” that organizes the film, argues Gilles Deleuze, “retains its final ambiguity,” since “we do not know whether the situation will emerge from it modified, re-established, cleansed of the crime, or whether nothing will be like it was before, and crime, always destined to take on new forms” will resurface.<sup>80</sup> In this regard, Deleuze continues elsewhere, *M* articulates the problem of judgment itself, for “it is the very possibility of judging which is called into question.”<sup>81</sup> Lang, Deleuze argues, thus “invents a Protagoras-style relativism” where the question of judgment is “hardly motivated by truth.”<sup>82</sup> This, then, reflects a fundamental condition of the film as text itself: “it is as if there is no truth any more, but only appearances, ... [E]verything is appearances” or “false images,” and “yet this novel state transforms rather than suppresses the system of judgment.”<sup>83</sup> In fact, the undecidability within this “novel state” is further emphasized by the hand that finally lays claim on Beckert’s shoulder to transport him from the make-shift court to the legitimate system of law. From “in the name of

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<sup>80</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, pp. 152 – 153.

<sup>81</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 138.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

the law” spoken here as the disembodied voice that “belongs” to the hand, the film shifts to the final reading by a court session “in the name of the people.” But the finality of this reading is superseded by the allegorical image of three grieving mothers, one of whom proclaims in a mourning voice that “our children will not be brought back to life by this,” as we “must watch them ever more carefully.” In this respect, the film proposes to offer the intervention of the law as a solution for an “arrest,” but it ultimately follows the logic of the legal lack of accountability, or the paragraph 51 of *Unzurechnungsfähigkeit* invoked at the kangaroo court, to its end and comes to rest on the allegorized faces of motherhood who lament the limitations of justice accorded in the system of law.

Dana Stevens points out that “*M* inscribes here in its final instants the sovereignty of film’s newest technical resource, the voice,”<sup>84</sup> as the problematics of writing vanishes in favor of pure speech. But *M* already anticipates the subsequent development of writing into a “pure force,” moving away from the convergence between signifier and signified as postulated by *M*, into a “centripetal spiraling in all directions, reproducing itself senselessly” in *Mabuse*.<sup>85</sup> Writing thus serves in this film to “acquire a new materiality, regardless of what it purports to ‘sign,’”<sup>86</sup> indicative of a “visual thematic of inscription” in Lang’s films to put into image a “kind of *mise-*

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<sup>84</sup> Dana Stevens, “Writing, Scratching, and Politics from *M* to *Mabuse*,” *Qui Parle* 7, no. 1 (fall – winter 1993): 59. The essay bases its analysis on an older version of the film that does not contain the long-lost final image of the mothers on a bench as it appears in the restored Munich version. In Stevens’ version, the voice of a mother, however, is heard, disembodied, over a black screen. The interpretation, therefore, is valid but neglects to take into account the process of aural allegorization that, even without the final images, renders as abstract the individual voice as one of motherhood itself.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

*en-abîme* of the entire history of writing.”<sup>87</sup> However, this notion of writing as a force unleashed is ultimately linked back to the question of the law as a social order in *M* and is therefore not as deliriously liberating in its subversive dismantling of the cohesion between signifier and signified as Stevens asserts. Anton Kaes remarks that there is no “conclusive evidence” that undeniably links Beckert to the crimes and that the film, therefore, “invites us at least to entertain the possibility that Beckert might be one of those who wrote letters to the press” in a misguided “hankering for recognition.”<sup>88</sup> This interpretation is possible, Kaes continues, because of Beckert’s urge for a “self-affirmation, publicly performed and ecstatically acted out,” so that it becomes a form of “self-incrimination as a psychotic break from life’s seriality, from an outsider’s expendability.”<sup>89</sup>

The importance of the work that Kuntzel, Stevens and Kaes have provided lies in registering the film’s textual operations as limit points, but their observations must be looked at in conjunction with each other in order to investigate how the system of judgment is “transformed” here, in Deleuze’s terms. This is all the more important because Kaes suggests that for Lang the film was “a work that explored how a single misfit could tear an entire city’s social fabric.”<sup>90</sup> This particular assessment runs counter to the vehemence with which the film insists on the reinforcement and inevitability of the social fabric across the various strata and scales that the film traverses. It is noteworthy, therefore, that such an understanding of the film would emphasize the ruptures and breaking points that are asserted as the direct result and social

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>88</sup> Anton Kaes, *M*, p. 72.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

consequence out of the presence of the “misfit” or the outsider and accept this conclusion as given throughout the film. Instead, it seems important to account for the manner in which this conceptualization of the tenuous fragility of the social order imposes itself on our understanding of the film and where we must locate the reasons for such an effect. In other words, do we need to accept the logic of inexorability that posits “M” as the ultimate outsider who must be exorcised from the community in order to reestablish the social order?

Given that the film employs the notion of totality for the representation of the social structure this question seems even more relevant. The amount of writing that is mobilized throughout the film serves as a means to designate the urban space of society as one of “chaotic” links or random connections. The elements of writing are established as seemingly irrational juxtapositions that nonetheless follow a particular logic of dissemination and circulation in the social network of information. Writing serves thus as a rebus-like enigma on the surface in need of a resolution through the social forces it has mobilized. The film employs this system of designation in order to postulate the kind of “reader” as citizen who is equipped to trace and arrange it into a semblance of coherence, and offers this reading entity ultimately in the conjunction of Schränker’s organized structure of surveillance and Lohmann’s structures of control within a totality of “law” enforcement. When it comes to the issue of judgment, however, it is crucial for Deleuze that Lang’s films point to a preservation of the “system of judgement [*sic*],”<sup>91</sup> albeit one that is transformed through the relativity of appearances, so that it imposes itself as a burden on “the side of the viewer, to which the conditions of possibility of judging the image itself are given.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 139.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

This mechanism of transference indicates another crucial instance of figuration in which a cycle of movement can only be arrested or resolved via a recourse to allegory, but since here the resolution involves the very conditions that determine a definite judgment, this means of engaging the viewer is not a matter of positioning an idealized or implied spectator but rather a disciplinary mode of establishing a social order. Much has been made of the ambivalence that makes it difficult to determine a political position for *M*, since it seems to generate a notion of empathy for Beckert, while aligning itself easily with the resentment of the angry masses against him. This, famously, prompted Joseph Goebbels to record in his diary entry enthusiastic praise for the film because it takes a stance “against humanitarian sentimentality” and predicts that one day Lang will be the director of the Nazi movement.<sup>93</sup> Lang’s own legend surrounding his life and escape from Germany would later work against this association, but his allegorization of the mode of discipline that structures the film remained in place and would continue unabated without him. Reteirated as a spectacle of judgment, *M* already points to the power of the individual, who can absolve himself of responsibility by abdicating the definition of who does and who does not belong to the community to the power of the mark which manifests itself at first only as a sign or a cipher on the screen. In relegating the question of accountability to a circulation of forces which celebrate the law as a spectacle, the film points out how little such categories as empathy and compassion mean at the moment of judgment unless its claims of justice are measured against itself.

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Anton Kaes, *M*, p. 73. The use of the term *Gefühlsduselei* (a kind of “sentimental wallowing”) in the original is noteworthy for its complete lack of nuance, since it does not even take into account a potential political position and caricatures the film’s effects as a strong response to cheap affectivity.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TITLES AND WRITING IN EARLY WEIMAR CENSORSHIP DECISIONS

In an elaborate archival project completed in 2003, the Deutsche Filminstitut in Frankfurt catalogued and then digitized for online retrieval all extant censorship materials, board correspondences, and censorship decisions for 890 films made between 1920 and 1938 by the Film-Oberprüfstelle Berlin, the “Superior Film Examination Board,” which was part of the Ministry for the Interior in the German Reich. This board was established in response to the problem of how to deal with censorship concerning the medium film on a national level after the end of World War I and the abdication of the Emperor. Ursula von Keitz describes the dilemma posed by the newly drafted constitution of the Weimar Republic in 1919, which specified in article 118 the fundamental “principle that ‘No censorship will take place.’”<sup>1</sup> The freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula von Keitz, “Films before the Court: The Theory and Practice of Film Assessment 1920 – 1938,” trans. Cyril Edwards at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/dt2tai10.htm> (link under “Zensurgutachten”). (A note on the URL: For the long period of archiving, all individual pages on the DIF website were subsumed under the following umbrella web address and therefore could only be accessed through the main portal <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/dframe12.htm>. Through this link, the specific web location of the censorship decisions can be found through the *site map* on this main page by following the link in the category *Recherchen* to the entry entitled

expression was guaranteed in the constitution which stated explicitly that “[e]very German has the right, within the limits of the general laws, to express his opinion freely by word, in writing, in print, in picture form, or in any other way.”<sup>2</sup> In the constitutional drafts of February 1919, this article included the important addition, “no censorship, especially no preliminary evaluation of stage or motion picture performances, will occur.”<sup>3</sup> However, states von Keitz, “the authors of the Weimar Reich Constitution remained suspicious of the relatively youthful medium of the cinema and its public,”<sup>4</sup> so that “a special regulation applied to the cinema from that point: ‘in the case of films, however, regulations which differ from the above may be prescribed by law.’”<sup>5</sup> Under the considerable pressure from conservative forces, the National Assembly established regulatory laws that were ratified on May 12, 1920, by the Social Democratic President Friedrich Ebert on the basis of the votes from the members of all ten parties represented in parliament except for the left-wing splinter party USPD, whose members voted against censorship.<sup>6</sup> This clause of exception, which granted the state the legal right to regulate the cinematic exhibition and the circulation of film and which was articulated as the *Reichslichtspielgesetz* or *RLG* that went into effect on May 29, 1920, indicates the exceptional importance that the status of film, or

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*Zensurgutachten*. However, all URLs in this document are hyperlinked. The main page for all censorship materials is located at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/dframe31.htm>.)

<sup>2</sup> As reprinted in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Loiperdinger, “Filmzensur und Selbstkontrolle: Politische Reifeprüfung,” in *Geschichte des Deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, and Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1993), p. 482.

<sup>4</sup> Von Keitz, “Films before the Court.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Loiperdinger, “Filmzensur und Selbstkontrolle,” p. 482.



“light plays,” occupies in the framework of a national democratic constitution to be developed, a framework that otherwise would allow for a relative but considerable degree of artistic and aesthetic autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

Following this law, two film censorship boards, or “film examination agencies,”<sup>8</sup> were established in the main film production centers Munich, responsible for film productions originating in Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, and Hesse, an area which overall accounted for roughly a tenth of all films produced, and Berlin, responsible for the remainder of the Reich and foreign films. The Berlin agency also served as the final arbitrator in decisions in its position as the “Superior Examination Board” and as the “Board of Appeals,” a status that in practice often led to considerable disputes in correspondences between the Munich and Berlin agencies. After a lengthy controversy surrounding questions of competence and whether the appropriate domain of jurisdiction for film evaluation lay within local communities, individual states, or the Reich, the two boards were instituted in order to enforce the regulatory efforts of evaluating a motion

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<sup>7</sup> In December 1926, the so-called “filth and trash law” (*Schmutz- und Schundgesetz*) was enacted, which added literature as the second artistic category subject to censorship, with the crucial difference, however, that an act of censorship could only be initiated on appeal *after* the publication of a literary work, so that publishing before any imposition of a limitation of circulation was always possible. See Christine Kopf, “‘Der Schein der Neutralität’ – Institutionelle Filmzensur in der Weimarer Republik” at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/news/dt2n13.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *Filmprüfstelle* and *Filmoberprüfstelle* are translated literally as “film examination agency” and “superior film examination agency.” Both the Munich and Berlin agencies could issue decisions which were binding for the entire area of the Reich. However, final decisions in appeals or on controversial cases were made in Berlin as the “superior film examination agency” within which the “film examination agency” was integrated. Abbreviated as *FPS* and *FOPS* respectively, the superior board was also often called the *OP* in artistic circles and the press, but here the term *censorship board* is used throughout for all agency decisions, unless the distinction between the various branches of the agency is relevant.

picture for its propriety and to grant it a certificate of clearance for its release. These debates formed part of the many challenges faced by the first democratic government of Germany, the so-called *Weimarer Koalition*, a coalition of Social Democrats and the liberal-centrist parties *Zentrum* and *DDP*.

While legally subsumed under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, the censorship boards were separate agencies with members appointed through the Ministry. In order to be approved for exhibition in the Reich, each individual film had to be submitted with an application for a censorship board permit and was then subjected to the examination process, which, as specified in the *RLG* paragraph 5, included “the film strip itself, the film title, and its accompanying text in word and writing,” as well as its advertising and publicity material.<sup>9</sup> A presiding member of the censorship agency, in conjunction with four assistant members, then assessed and reviewed all of these parts for every single foreign or domestic film to be exhibited in public and determined whether approval for circulation of the film could be granted. Following approval, each film was issued a “censorship card” that contained a record of the permissible segments and titles for the film. By law it was specified that the evaluating and presiding civil servants of the boards, appointed by the Minister of the Interior on the basis of suggestions submitted to the Ministry, were to be “distinguished persons of pedagogical and artistic stature.”<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 9 of the *RLG* further outlined the overall constitution of the boards. Apart from the civil servants employed in the service of the state, assistant evaluators were to be

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<sup>9</sup> Original paragraph at [http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate\\_sp/se/se\\_link\\_01.htm](http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate_sp/se/se_link_01.htm): “Die Prüfung der Bildstreifen umfaßt die Streifen selbst, den Titel und den verbindenden Text in Wort und Schrift.”

<sup>10</sup> *Reichslichtspielgesetz RLG* May 12, 1920, § 9, Abs. 2. The German formulation is “Die Beamten sollen Persönlichkeiten von pädagogischer und künstlerischer Bildung sein.” Document available at <http://www.documentarchiv.de/wr/1920/lichtspielgesetz.html>.

comprised of one quarter of members of the motion picture industry, one quarter of members “well-versed in the arts and literature,”<sup>11</sup> and one half of members experienced in the areas of public welfare work, people’s continuing education, or youth welfare services.

These were the constituents that convened for all film permit decisions, which consisted of a film screening, followed by a closed-door assessment and confidential hearing, and a fact-finding decision. In general, this meant that the board committees were always comprised of a supervising civil servant and the four board members, two of whom had to be from the area of public welfare and one of whom had to be from the area of “film commerce” for each decision.<sup>12</sup> In practice, however, it was permissible for the presiding board member to make an evaluative decision independently, if the majority of assisting members agreed to this procedure. The assistant board members were appointed to the position for a duration of three years by the Reich Minister of the Interior, “on the basis of lists of suggestions submitted by interested bodies.”<sup>13</sup> The evaluative contributions by the assistant board members were to be submitted “to the best of their knowledge and belief” and without prejudice, as ascertained “by handshake” by the presiding board member.<sup>14</sup> Youngsters between the ages of 18 and 20 were to be consulted in cases deciding whether a film exhibition was permitted to include minors. Any violations against this law, including the attempt to circulate either nationally or internationally a film or parts of a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., § 9, Abs. 1. Specified as appointments of “der auf den Gebieten der Kunst und Literatur bewanderten Personen.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. § 11, Abs. 1. The German *Lichtspielgewerbe* implies “film commerce,” “film industry,” or “film trade” and therefore could indicate both film production or film exhibition.

<sup>13</sup> Ursula von Keitz, “Films before the Court.”

<sup>14</sup> *RLG*, § 10.

film that had been evaluated and denied an exhibition permission, were punishable with a prison sentence of up to three years or a fine of up to 100,000 Mark or both.<sup>15</sup>

While von Keitz in her account is justifiably suspicious of the constituents appointed to these boards, they did belong to the three main areas of expertise as defined legally, the “moving picture industry,” “arts and literature,” and the realm of “social welfare, education, or youth work.” Von Keitz notes that “[r]epresentatives from the areas of film criticism or film production were conspicuous by their absence,”<sup>16</sup> but it is not necessarily evident in what ways she understands “film production” to be different from the “motion picture industry,” since “film commerce” was the legally defined category from which acceptable members could be appointed. In fact, von Keitz neglects to mention a remarkable formulation in the law which specified that in the selection of members from the area of film commerce, “the employees and workers in this trade are to be considered in sufficiently adequate numbers.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the attempt to emphasize the legal stipulation of the artistic and literary credentials of the board members is evident, for example, in the appointment of Thomas Mann to the Munich censorship board in 1920 as well. As a prominent author and vocal supporter of the newly established democratic Weimar Republic, Mann was, however, apparently “frequently indisposed” and

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<sup>15</sup> *RLG*, § 18. Remarkably, the severity of this punishment was equally applicable in cases when a film permitted for adults only was screened before minors. By law, *Jugendliche*, or minors, were defined as persons above the age of 14 and below the age of 18, in distinction to children below the age of 14. A more general legal frame included *Heranwachsende*, or adolescents, which was defined as up to the age of 21.

<sup>16</sup> Von Keitz, “Films before the Court.”

<sup>17</sup> *RLG*, § 9, Abs. 2: “Bei der Auswahl der Beamten und Beisitzer aus den Kreisen des Lichtspielgewerbes sind die Angestellten und Arbeiter dieses Gewerbes ausreichend zu berücksichtigen.”

therefore unable to fulfill his obligations for the evaluation of films for long.<sup>18</sup> In this proportional division and with the broadly conceived area of representation, the constitution of the boards acknowledged the potential divergence of interested parties so that, in theory, conflicts between these factions could be addressed and mitigated. Moreover, in the first few years of censorship board decisions, at least nominal efforts were made in a number of precarious cases to include hearings by representative experts such as diplomats for international issues. Adolescents as the legally stipulated “youth representatives” were heard and their opinions taken into account for decisions on exempting a film’s exhibition restriction for adults only, that is, whenever important issues concerning the mental health and morale of minors would be assessed.

Von Keitz puts the existence and constitution of the censorship boards into a larger theoretical context, since she attributes the exceptional status of film in this respect to a particular differentiation of its mimetic character that is taken as social transparency. As she states,

“[t]he difference in the way in which literary media and visual media, particularly film, were treated, which formed the basis of the new legitimation of censorship after the event and its legal justification, suggests that images in this phase were perceived primarily in terms of their referentiality to social reality - in contrast to literary texts or dramatic productions.”<sup>19</sup>

The assertion of exceptionality is noteworthy because it allows for a documentation and record of the degree to which film was taken seriously by the emerging state through its

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. the materials on film censorship, assembled by Herbert Birett, a retired Munich librarian, on his personal website dedicated to documents and original materials pertaining to the history of German cinema at <http://www.kinematographie.de/LSG1920.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Von Keitz, “Films before the Court.”

representative civil servants in the decisions of the censorship boards. Weimar law specified five absolute criteria, the presence of which would necessitate the prevention of any public exhibition, but in practice these criteria could be interpreted broadly and divergently. As paragraph 1, article 2, of the *RLG* elaborates, a film is to be denied public exhibition as determined by examination when “a projection is suitable or likely to endanger the public order or safety, to offend religious sensibilities, to have a demoralizing or brutalizing effect, or to endanger the German reputation or the relations of Germany with foreign states.”<sup>20</sup> A crucial modification that denied any film public exhibition in case it was “likely to endanger the vital interests of the state” was added in 1931.<sup>21</sup> Finally, a fifth and exceptional criterion for granting

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<sup>20</sup> *Reichslichtspielgesetz*, § 1, Abs. 2. A reproduction of the original legal text in its 1931 version is available at [http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate\\_sp/se/se\\_link\\_22.htm](http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate_sp/se/se_link_22.htm). It is also cited in Christine Kopf, “Der Schein der Neutralität.” The *RLG* was modified twice with slight procedural changes between 1920 and 1930. The assessment of fees and rates associated with the evaluation procedure was legally changed at least fifteen times during the hyperinflation period in 1923.

<sup>21</sup> In October 1931, in one of the state-of-emergency declarations (*Notverordnung*) by the Reich President, the following adjustment to the first paragraph of the *RLG* was made and a primary and foremost criterion, preceding the ones that particularize the definitions of this infringement, was added: As articulated now in § 1 of the *RLG*, a film was to be denied public exhibition “if an evaluation of the motion picture determines that it is suitable or likely to endanger vital interests of the state.” In doing so, the interests of the state were now legally spelled out as the primary function of film censorship. In the original, a permission is denied “wenn die Vorführung eines Bildstreifens geeignet ist, lebenswichtige Interessen des Staates oder die öffentliche Ordnung oder Sicherheit zu gefährden, das religiöse Empfinden zu verletzen, verrohend oder entsittlichend zu wirken, das deutsche Ansehen oder die Beziehungen Deutschlands zu auswärtigen Staaten zu gefährden.” Prior to this decision, another major change involved the so-called “Lex Remarque,” which restricted and limited the permission for the screenings of

permission to project a film in public applied in all cases determining whether “youths under the age of eighteen” were to be included in the granting of permission to screen the film. In addition to the criteria listed above therefore, paragraph 1, article 3, declared that all films for which “it is feared that they might exert a detrimental influence on the moral, mental, or hygienic development of adolescents or that they might overstimulate their imagination”<sup>22</sup> were to be prohibited from being screened before minors. In certain cases, the Ministry for Defense was able to impose restrictions on a film as well.

Significantly, the *RLG* also included a so-called “tendency clause” or *Tendenzklausel*, which asserted that no film was to be denied permission solely “for its political, social, religious, ethical, or ideological tendencies as such.”<sup>23</sup> This clause, drafted early on and prominently incorporated in the *RLG* as the second provision in paragraph 1, was especially important because it allowed for films to have a particular point-of-view, or an “ideological tendency,” but they could not be denied permission for their inherent point-of-view *as such*. This would indicate that the inherent structure and meaning of a film was legally inviolate as an artistic entity, save for the five criteria of exception, and therefore this clause already codified into law the principles of an incipient New Criticism in relation to the status of the work of art in and of itself and as an internally coherent artifact. Moreover, this clause also regulated that a film was not to be denied permission for “reasons external to its own content,” which meant that the context of any public

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films of “scientific or artistic merit” for “select circles.” This change was implemented in March 1931 in response to Lewis Milestone’s 1930 film *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. The original reads that films denied permission are those “von welchen eine schädliche Einwirkung auf die sittliche, geistige oder gesundheitliche Entwicklung oder eine Überreizung der Phantasie der Jugendlichen zu besorgen ist.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. In the original, “ideological tendencies as such” reads “Weltanschauungstendenz als solcher.”

debates or controversies on the material or content of the film could not be held against its potential exhibition or form the basis of rejection. Paradoxically, of course, this assertion of the film as an autonomous entity was belied by the following caveat in the commentaries to the *RLG* that the evaluation of content “should only occur insofar as conclusions can be drawn on the presumptive effects on the attendant during a screening.”<sup>24</sup>

This judicial line of reasoning is very significant because it establishes the idea of a benevolent state which, through its representatives, can be trusted to uphold the interests of the mental well-being and sensibilities of its subjects by recognizing the merits and demerits of a film as an object in itself. In the same manner that the censorship board was charged with the protection of youth, its duty to prevent certain films from reaching a public attests to the board’s role as an instantiated representative of the state’s responsibility for the welfare of its subjects. Thus, the legally codified prevention of film on the basis of its presumed effects stands counter to the recognition of a film as its own discrete entity and the citation of the potential influences on a film’s attendants demonstrates a political will based on the “logical impossibility of determining a film’s future effects *ex ante*.”<sup>25</sup> These elaborately and legally contradictory compromises can also explain the initial disputes surrounding the competence and legitimacy of the film boards as institutions because the enforcement of film censorship prior to the Weimar Republic was restricted to the domain of local authorities, which most often meant police

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<sup>24</sup> Christine Kopf, “Der Schein der Neutralität.” Kopf, however, does not clarify that this passage is not found in the actual law itself, but rather stems from later legal commentary to the *RLG*. In the original: “Die mutmaßliche Wirkung bei der Vorführung auf den Besucher.” Of course, “the attendant” is masculine in German, but in the practice of censorship decisions the spectator invoked was often explicitly or implicitly feminized as a helpless viewer who could not control a film’s effects or impact.

<sup>25</sup> Loiperdinger, “Filmzensur und Selbstkontrolle,” p. 484.



departments under the auspices of the individual states or *Länder* and the federalization of this ability to enforce orderly “community standards or safety,” which often formed the basis for earlier local censorship decisions, indicated a significantly diminished regional power in favor of the state as one cohesive entity. Apart from the logistics of enforcement, the challenges posed here are directly related to the question of the legitimacy of the state’s powers, since conservative forces were suspicious of the Ministry of the Interior to enforce an adequate degree of censorship and to impose it on a nationwide scale as they sought to rely on the more restrictive, because more malleable, definitions of order through notions of “local” acceptance and propriety. Ultimately, the motion picture laws and the subsequent prevalence of the censorship boards reaffirm how seriously the power of the medium film was taken at the time, even if its virtues and values were not necessarily acknowledged in the *RLG* but rather dismissed as insidious.

Furthermore, the jurisdiction entrusted to the representative civil servants of the state the ability to deduce specific subject positions in the general spectator across differentiating categories of identity and the legitimacy to base their decisions on the recognition of these in the films evaluated. What thus gets codified in this respect through the establishment of the censorship boards is not just the detriments of individual films, but rather the institutionalization of the modes of recognizing the citizen in film through the fault lines along the definitions of what is permissible and what is objectionable. In the censorship decisions, therefore, we can delineate an idealized formulation of the imaginary relations between the state and its subjects, while these relations are encoded as issues of the protection of citizens for the sake of their own well-being and safety, so that they are indemnified from the rampant powers of the medium imposing on their attention and taxing their imagination.

The assumed ability of film to interpolate its values and influence the character and mental constitution of its viewers, albeit with a relative differentiation between innate adult and youthful imagination, thus defines a power that can impose a subject position onto its viewers. Because this power competes directly with the state's ultimate exceptional right to do so in defining its subjects, it becomes the duty of the censorship board to enforce the limitations of such spheres of influence in public and thereby curtail any conflicting or countercurrent impositions of power. In other words, even before and beyond von Keitz's concept of a specific "referentiality" to a social reality, it is the imaginative power of film to shape subjectivity that directly competes with the domain of the state and its instruments to define identities by law. Therefore, this singular competing power necessitates a regulation of its potential forces because it constitutes a challenge that directly infringes on the interests of the state, a power which no other art form can aspire to, and thus requires an institutionalized "ideal" or representative audience in the censorship board which evaluates any and all of a film's specific or potential subjective effects prior to its release for a general public, where such effects of subjectivization might become actualized.

It should obviously come as no surprise then that because of this understanding the decisions in the practice of the censorship boards were often extremely prescriptive, rigidly conservative as well as fundamentally biased, and alarmingly so in the later years of the Weimar Republic. While it is, therefore, accurate to state that the "norms of censorship reflected the standards of the conservative establishment,"<sup>26</sup> the early practice of censorship impositions cannot be easily subsumed within such categories. Thus, it is also slightly misleading to state that

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, eds., *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 48.

in the general practice of censorship “[a]fter 1922, film could be censored if it threatened the vital interests of the state.”<sup>27</sup> It may certainly be relevant to investigate how threats to the state were conceptualized in the first few years of censorship decisions, but the legal codification of the “vital interests of the state” as determined in relation to the medium film was not established until 1931.<sup>28</sup> This insight also structures the line of argument offered in the accompanying materials provided by the Deutsche Filminstitut as well as the essays by von Keitz and Kopf. In such structural emphases, the historical evaluation predicates itself on a mode which helps to understand the basis on which the rise of conservative to fascist forces to power in the Weimar Republic can be explained and the later developments towards increasingly repressive decisions can be put into a context. While this explanatory mode may certainly be necessary again, it also confirms what Thomas Elsaesser terms the special “imaginary” status of Weimar, which keeps in a bind any material to be evaluated from this period within a particular frame of reference as if in a vise, so that any understanding constantly returns to the already-known by “adding to the Weimar cinema’s ‘historical imaginary,’ that is, providing mutually confirming metaphors between the film text and the context.”<sup>29</sup>

The danger, as Elsaesser asserts, is that this repetitive mode of explanation ultimately only yields a degree of self-evidence that prevents new means of thinking and remains committed to confirm what has long since “settled into historical clichés.”<sup>30</sup> Accompanying these clichés and, to a large extent, according to Elsaesser, defining them in the first place, are the

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<sup>27</sup> Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> In conjunction with the October state-of-emergency declarations (*Notverordnung*).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

works by Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer, so that “‘Expressionist film’ and ‘Weimar cinema’ continue to signal ready-made, self-evident identities, the former slanted towards the artists that produced the films, and the latter focusing on the society that consumed them – two halves of a whole that to this day spells Germany’s national cinema.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Lotte Eisner’s *Haunted Screen* articulates the conceptual modalities around the hieroglyphic materiality of Expressionism and thus defines the terms of the debates to come early on. In her discussion, for example, of *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler*, Eisner remarks that in the film “the *objets d’art* shine out insistently, Expressionistically, as if they are infused with an insidious latent life.”<sup>32</sup> And, she continues, these objects cease to be part of the setting, but rather become enigmatic because “[t]heir luminous presence makes the silence more and more oppressive, and they are as it were the *hieroglyphs* of an ineffable solitude and despair.”<sup>33</sup> When Kracauer, by comparison, discusses Weimar cinema, even his chapter headings, such as “Forebodings,” “Procession of Tyrants,” “Destiny,” “Decline,” “Brief Reveille,” to “Murderer Among Us,” have a remarkable similarity to the intertitle chapters of a silent film that makes his narrative, which, following Elsaesser’s logic, might be termed a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, sound like the *Gruselkabinett* (or “cabinet of horrors”) of Expressionism that the title of his study suggests.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (1952; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 242.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

This narrative provides, in Kracauer's formulation, "a secret history involving the inner dispositions of the German people."<sup>35</sup>

Elsaesser delineates the means by which such mutually reinforcing and self-affirming modes of imagination apply when it comes to debates on German national cinema and he demonstrates that such imaginary narratives become intertwined with the very subject of the historical investigation itself. Eisner and Kracauer serve as the two originating nodal points for the imaginary framework within which Weimar cinema is evaluated and interpreted. In this convergence these imaginary narratives merge to become ineluctably yoked so that one might say that historical explanations take on a labyrinthine Expressionist character themselves until they constitute what Elsaesser calls a "Möbius strip,"<sup>36</sup> where fact and fiction, history and text, become interchangeably fused. Elsaesser's exceptional work into the mechanisms of this peculiar imaginary, however, carries with it the danger of a prescriptive sense of boundaries and decorum as well, because his evocative visual metaphor defines the terrain of inquiry by reducing it to the limits of an inescapable surface area of entrapment. To paraphrase another of Elsaesser's apodictic assessments, the historian engaged in the cinema of the Weimar Republic therefore inevitably becomes involved in what might be termed a "hypnotic hermeneutics."<sup>37</sup> However, while Elsaesser's lasting achievement may be that he detaches Weimar scholarship from this symptomatic grip that the hypnotic power of the image exerts on the historian, he insists that even the most canonized Expressionist films which have come to epitomize the mysteries of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 62. In discussing the force with which *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* still frames film scholarship, Elsaesser speaks of the power that exerts "such a hypnotic as well as hermeneutic fascination on the critics."

Weimar cinema “intervened politically – perversely, perhaps – by refusing to take sides, by resisting referentiality, which is to say, refusing to be used either on behalf of rhetoric or reality.”<sup>38</sup>

Precisely this resistance to referentiality implies a larger, more definitive terrain of meaning where the artistic negotiations with the social realities of Weimar can only be determined by the viewer as hermeneut, and these encounters document a dimension that “testifies to something else, in the end no less historical,”<sup>39</sup> even when or especially if they are only discernible as a figuration, whose “apocryphal character merely adds to its allegorising gesture,”<sup>40</sup> as Elsaesser remarks, for example, in response to Lang’s account of the social realities he claimed to have incorporated into his exotic fantasy *Halbblut*. The challenge posed here is linked to the very question of how the boundaries between fact and fiction are to be delineated, that is, in order to prevent the error, which, according to Elsaesser, “posits a structural convergence between story and history,”<sup>41</sup> and to the question of whether it is permissible to analyze Weimar cinema as a set of clues or a “symptomatology, so perfectly readable – with hindsight,”<sup>42</sup> a mode of evidentiary analysis Elsaesser even goes so far as to describe with the term “foolish.”<sup>43</sup> According to Elsaesser, the historical analyses of Weimar cinema require, therefore, a distinction between a proper, sober-minded approach and a “hypnotic” hermeneutics

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 97.

of symptoms in constant danger of becoming contaminated by the effects of its very object of study.

The quandary of how these distinctive epistemological boundaries can be drawn accurately points to a territorial dimension in the fundamental sense as a field of inquiry because they are defined by the notion of what properly belongs to its area and by the problem of how to disambiguate between “clues” that provide an erroneous reading. This reading, in turn, only yields the febrile fallacy of conjecture as its own symptomatology, and its opposite methodology, namely a reading that rejects clues and disavows symptoms in favor of, in Elsaesser’s formulation, an “anti-idealist” de-demonization that make visible “a dynamics of assimilation and exclusion marking the nation and its national imaginary... once these have become the primary sites of subjectification and intersubjectivity.”<sup>44</sup> Elsaesser’s invocation of the proper terrain of analysis against the opprobrium of an allegorical hermeneutics of symptoms is itself an instantiation of the equal impulse that motivates the censorship board as a site of subjectification in its determination of the detrimental effects and the means by which it prunes a filmic text from its symptomatic deformities. Elsaesser’s theoretical achievement, therefore, ultimately lies in the fact that his work elevates and forces Weimar film scholarship to culminate in an awareness of the metadiscursive level at which fiction and fact contaminate their own boundaries until they comprise the obverse of each other.<sup>45</sup> On this level, a movement within and between these two

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 438.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to suggest a return to a mode of analysis between material registers indebted to the New Historicist understanding that, in Stephen Greenblatt’s formulation, requires the means to “develop terms to describe the ways in which material – here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth – is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property,” although it does follow a different conception of

registers of the dimensions where instances of allegorical signification are produced does not only become possible but, in fact, necessary again.

In this respect, an assessment of the legitimacy of the terrain of inquiry points to another, seemingly irreconcilable aspect that needs to concern the film historian when we take into account von Keitz's claim that the censorship board was engaged in the transparencies of referentiality alongside Elsaesser's determination that "the cinema entered the public sphere in the early 1920s, not, as its implacable avant-garde critics had hoped, by 'realistically' documenting the class conflicts and social injustices, but by a bricolage appropriation"<sup>46</sup> in which various elements of high and low culture become assembled and reconfigured to the point that they lose any grounded connection to referentiality and instead emerge as enigmatic allegories. In other words, a cinema fundamentally and structurally driven by gestures toward allegorization and by elements of meaning almost completely detached from referentiality is nonetheless evaluated by an institutionalized agency which serves as its primary hermeneutic "interpreter" to determine the modes of subjectification. This institution is the censorship board as the primary reader of filmic texts for the sake of safeguarding the public from detrimental effects through interpretive viewing acts that postulate these effects as actual, declare them "effective" and, therefore, produce a register that posits them as "real."

Moreover, in its privilege of determining the suitability of films for screenings, the censorship board evaluates these effects in order to serve as the primary instance which defines a film's possible subjectivizing forces and regulate the film accordingly. At this juncture,

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the boundaries of such registers. Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veenser (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 97.



therefore, the question of identity and the issue of how identity relates to the subject position for an inchoate national state both need to be addressed as a relevant element in the analysis of the source material of the Deutsche Filminstitut again. Since the censorship board's determination of the subject position who will be adversely affected by the film viewing and the assessment of the potential threats to interests vital to the functions of the state both occur in the oscillation between transparency and allegorization, the very acts of interpretation and evaluation by the censorship board that posit a viewing subject need to become the focus of investigation in order to establish how these mechanisms are determined to be at work.

For this concern, the early decisions of the Berlin censorship board prove to be a particularly interesting case, since the board's institutionalization during the first Weimar coalition government came immediately after a time of severe inner upheavals and regional challenges from the left and the right that threatened the newly established sovereignty of the nation, most dangerously by the March 1920 *Kapp-Putsch*, a four-day putsch by disgruntled rightwing militia factions that brought the country to the brink of civil war. These events were closely followed by or coincided with communist workers' uprisings in the Ruhrgebiet, Thuringia, Hamburg, and in the Middle German industrial areas Halle, Leuna, Merseburg, and Mansfeld, all of which escalated and were terminated through brutal acts of suppression by local militia and police forces.<sup>47</sup> While the Weimar constitution was significantly shaped by the constitutional scholar and first Minister of the Interior, Hugo Preuß, the film censorship board was established under the leadership of Minister Erich Koch-Weser, a lawyer and member of the

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<sup>47</sup> For a chronological account and for primary documents relating to the early years of the Weimar Republic, see, for example, Wolfgang Michalka and Gottfried Niedhard, eds., *Die Ungeliebte Republik: Dokumente zur Innen- und Aussenpolitik Weimars 1918 – 1933*, Munich: dtv 1980.

liberal-centrist party DDP, from the ranks of which, along with the Social Democratic party SPD, all ten Ministers of the Interior were provided in succession to the Republic until November 1923 when the conservative Karl Jarres took over.

The fact that the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior until November 1923 was governed by liberal democratic party members in coalition arrangements facing various crises and significant existential threats to their own legitimacy and constitutional state power makes the work of the censorship boards in these early years more important than the overview provided by von Keitz would suggest. As she states, the problem posed by the board's establishment was that it was "perched between the status of judiciary body and executive body," so that "[t]he persons who in the last resort decided whether to permit or forbid films were both judges and administrators."<sup>48</sup> In this respect, the film censorship board was an institutional entity that was charged with a complicated balancing act of not only determining the boundaries of filmic violations to their public exposure, but also with establishing and administering these limitations in a coherent and congruent manner and ultimately with affirming and enforcing such decisions by judicial decree.

Von Keitz dismisses the first four years of the work of the censorship board in favor of the familiar narrative lamented by Elsaesser when she summarizes that "[u]ntil 1924 the Berlin Film Censorship Headquarters was headed by the author and senior executive officer Dr. Bulcke," who "was dismissed and succeeded in 1 March 1934 [*sic*] by the lawyer Dr. Ernst

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<sup>48</sup> Ursula von Keitz, "Films before the Court."

Seeger.”<sup>49</sup> “Seeger,” she continues, “was a typically conscientious civil servant who had no problems in complying with the change of government on 30 January 1933,”<sup>50</sup> that is, when the Nazis took over power. As the nation’s “top” censor, Seeger encapsulates the banality of a bureaucrat who nonetheless undergirds the instruments of power. In other words, the constitution of the board and its decisions do not merit further investigation until the point that it was run under the auspices of the opportunistic and obsequious magistrate Dr. Seeger, which would then explain and confirm the ease with which the media industry was incorporated into the construction of a fascist state. The characterization of Seeger’s personality might by no means be inadequate, but von Keitz’s summary obscures a more complicated picture regarding his promotion to succeed Bulcke at the censorship board. In doing so, she inadvertently again accepts the limitations that follow the structural framework Elsaesser delineates for a discussion of Weimar cinema and thereby prevents a more nuanced understanding of the complications in the early years of the censorship board. The March 1924 dismissal of Bulcke came at a time of restructuring in the Ministry of the Interior during the first conservative-centrist government of Chancellor Wilhelm Marx and the Minister of Interior Karl Jarres, but Seeger had been an active member of the censorship board from the start, that is, he did not accede to the post and enter the domain of censorship from an outside position. Seeger had been prominently engaged in the drafting of the *RLG* laws in 1920, and had been involved with film regulations and film censorship affairs in an official capacity since 1915. He had already been made an associate

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. The chronological error lies in the typography of the translation, not the original. Nonetheless, even the accidental conflation of temporal events separated by a full decade follows the same logic of a historical narrative of inevitability.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

member of the censorship board in 1921, which he later ran until 1933 when he was entrusted to oversee the Film Section of the Ministry of Propaganda until his death in 1937, where one of his obituaries praised him for his “clean and just stance in censorship matters.”<sup>51</sup>

By contrast, Bulcke is still a relatively unknown if not enigmatic figure, and von Keitz does not even provide his first name nor any additional information regarding his person.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, from the outset the responsibility for allowing a film to be shown finally rested on the head of the censorship board, who, with the support of the assistant board members, was entrusted to safeguard the public order and decide in lieu of the public as a representative of the state in case a film was liable to infringe upon this order. In the privilege of censorship, the monopoly of power of the state as a sovereign entity is affirmed and ultimately any expression against this sovereignty is determined as a “willful declaration against the state.”<sup>53</sup> Thus these decisions provide a nexus point where the presumed vital interests of the state coincide or conflict with those of the public and therefore offer the possibility of evaluating the self-definition of the state as determined by its ongoing representation through its civil servants and magistrates, in this case Bulcke himself as the final arbitrator. His censorship decisions often concerned particular textual or visual passages, the removal of which would reverse exhibition prohibitions, and they were always issued as legal declarations of fact findings. Most often, however, these declarations of fact are couched in sophisticated evaluations through a very close analysis of the film in question and the legal discourse adheres to a highly developed sensibility

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<sup>51</sup> Obituary “Ministerialrat Dr. Seeger,” *Film-Kurier*, August 18, 1937, original reproduced at [http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate\\_sp/se/se\\_link\\_42.htm](http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/collate/collate_sp/se/se_link_42.htm).

<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Martin Loiperdinger neglects him entirely by making no mention of Bulcke’s name.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Martin Loiperdinger, “Filmzensur und Selbstkontrolle,” in *Geschichte des Deutschen Films*, p. 479.

to the nuances of meaning and a generous stance in respect to the artistic and commercial efforts of film production. However, as a fundamental premise and in keeping with the legal basis of censorship, Bulcke was guided by the assumption that the medium film was important enough to warrant reservations against any screenings until they were lifted by a censorship board's declaration of clearance, which, in accordance with the legal foundation, resulted in a "de facto primary general prohibition against exhibition"<sup>54</sup> so that a film would not infringe on the interests of the state.

This is certainly not to say that decisions were purely based on a capricious political restrictionism, since the formulations in the decisions of the early years of the censorship board convey a sense that they were guided more by a general understanding of social decorum and a particular idea of the public good, for the benefit of which the board members were willing to subject themselves to the mass of image material churned out by a productive industry as protective guardians. In this respect, the board members, and Bulcke especially as the signature holder of the decisions, take on a paternalistic sacrificial position in order to make protective decisions of propriety in lieu of the larger public for which they regulate their imagination. Sober value judgments and detached indifference structure the general evaluations in response to images that are often described in the decisions as "debased" or "sensationalistic." Nonetheless, even when a film received the harshest assessment of the absence of any merit, with the criteria most often invoked through the words *Kolportage* ("pulp fiction"), *Schund* ("trash") or *reißerisch* ("sensationalist"), the board provided the film petitioner with degrees of intervention and changes that would enable a film to be shown in public. The criteria of value here are noteworthy, because *Kolportage* carries the connotation of "colportage" without its religious

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

dimension, as a form of “peddling” or “hawking” pulp-fiction material to the baser instincts, as does “reißerisch,” which indicates an almost delirious sensationalism.<sup>55</sup>

The board’s function in this regard is less restrictive than regulatory in the sense that its suggestions of trimming potential excesses of coarse sensationalism can regulate and control the channeling of the public’s inevitable response to the stimulation of images against its own good, to the point that the decisions offer specific and minute suggestions to remove or alter details so that the film can evade prohibition. This protective assessment of a film’s effects, which nonetheless was grounded in a understanding of the coherence of its own internal visual and textual elements, was the main responsibility of the censorship board. Consequently, however, this development was guided by a general rigidity concerning the appropriate representations of subjectification and thus the decisions articulate the disciplinary positions of the subject in relation to the conceptions of how the state imagines itself through its representatives. In the Filminstitut’s documents Bulcke emerges as the person most actively involved in the cultivation of the board’s benevolent paternal and protective disciplinary approach. As the first chairman of the superior censorship board and the one responsible for the final instances of decisions, Dr. Carl Bulcke was also at the time a prominent author of poetry and novels as well as a lawyer. He had been a state attorney in the city of Essen before he moved to Berlin in his position as a state attorney to work in film censorship affairs. Until his dismissal in 1924, Bulcke chaired most of the hearings on controversial films and under his imprimatur as state attorney, Bulcke’s and thus

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<sup>55</sup> The censorship board of appeals decision B.210.21 signed by Bulcke for the film *Die Große Sensation* (Adolf Abter, D 1921) spells out the definition of what makes a *Schundfilm* or a “trash film”: “Characteristics of a trash film are the lack of psychological motivation, a heightened lust for sensation, the inferior quality of the content, the inveracity [*Unwahrhaftigkeit*] of the representation, and the sentimentality [*Rührseligkeit*] of the plot.”

the censorship board of appeals' decisions were final and could not be appealed. Nonetheless, very little archival information about Carl Bulcke remains available or survives in reference sources and his figure seems to have all but disappeared from chronicles of the period.

In the decisions and the lines of reasoning offered, however, the declarations that are issued with the signature of attorney Bulcke, whose name serves as the chief assessor of the dangers to the public good, point to a person who, with imperturbable judicial calm and in command of a self-assured logic that justifies his own righteous decisions, parses the filmic evidence before him without fail and assesses their possible transgressive harm when the standards of the times are measured and weighed against this potential. Here, a figure of Bulcke emerges which is akin to the heroic figure of the state attorney von Wenk in Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler*, who, with his level-headed and no-nonsense approach, is willing to descend into the depths of society and subject himself to great personal risk, in order to protect a guileless and easily manipulated public in depraved, chaotic times, yet ultimately emerges unscathed. Such characteristics would correspond closely to the stereotypical public imagination of an East Prussian aristocratic heritage and they fit Carl Bulcke as well. Elsaesser's caution notwithstanding, a mode of inversion is in effect here as well between the fictional and factual dimension, as analyses of Weimar cinema are wont to develop. Indeed, there are a few remarkable similarities between the fictional character von Wenk and the public persona of Carl Bulcke, which suggest an interesting convergence between these two realms, and which might even indicate that Lang modeled his protagonist who fights for the legitimacy of the state in a time of existential crisis against the subversive and extraterritorial criminal Doctor Mabuse at least in part on Dr. Bulcke himself.

Carl Bulcke was born April 29, 1875, in the East Prussian city of Königsberg and studied law at the University of Freiburg before he became the district or “state” attorney in the city of Essen. Following the work of his later colleague Ernst Seeger, who became involved with film in 1915, Bulcke seems to have been appointed to work on film censorship matters during World War I by the arch conservative politician, economist, and former colonial affairs officer Karl Hellferich, the Minister of the Interior of the Reich from May 1916 to November 1917. At this point, film censorship, which had been centralized and streamlined by the Prussian Ministry of the Interior around 1910 as a preventative prohibition practice requiring local law enforcement clearance, was directly affected by the ongoing war at the time and became actively involved in shaping morale. A strict Prussian war missive was issued in December 1914, a few months after the beginning of the war, which specified that “all films are to be prohibited that as a result of their superficiality and shallow insipidity are no longer suitable for these current serious times.”<sup>56</sup> The particular approach required for the determination of which films were “suitable” and “serious” for a contemporary public seems to have been incorporated very effectively by Bulcke and his colleagues and, indeed, such appeals to the contemporary situation or the state of affairs “in these times” can be traced in numerous censorship board decisions. Frequently, decisions were structured in their formulations by invoking the touchstone of “these times” throughout the Weimar practice of film censorship.

When Bulcke was selected as the chief film censor in 1920 his position on all decisions was still listed as “state attorney” until he was promoted to *Oberregierungsrat*, the equivalent of a “senior magistrate,” in late 1921. Seeger, as a devoted career civil servant, whose commentaries on the *RLG* would make him a prominent legal figure as well, was appointed as

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<sup>56</sup> Cited in Loiperdinger, p. 522.



part of the Berlin censorship board around the same time. Bulcke, on the other hand, was known at the time as a lyrical poet and novelist as well, whose works “mark him as an exceptional depicter of reality, especially of the one in his East Prussian homeland,” according to the entry on him in the twelve-volume 1924 - 1930 edition of the renowned *Meyer’s Encyclopaedia*.<sup>57</sup> He collected art in his spare time<sup>58</sup> and wrote more than a dozen works, with the novels *Ein Mensch namens Balzereit* (1917) and *Tapferer Cassio* (1930) as his most successful, along with novellas and poetry. He was also the first chair of the original lobbying and trade organization for authors, the *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller*, founded in 1909. This work and his writing career ran parallel to his service as a state attorney, first in Essen and later in Berlin. While it is difficult to discern the content and subject matter in Bulcke’s literary work, the title of all of his novellas, and some of his novels, contain numerous references to female given names (Sweet Lilli,” “Poor Betty,” “Silke’s Love,” “Beautiful Frau Schmelzer,” and so forth). They certainly suggest an abiding interest on his part in the perils and tribulations of young women.<sup>59</sup> When exactly Bulcke

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<sup>57</sup> *Meyers Lexikon*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. 2 (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1925), p. 1063, s.v. “Carl Bulcke.” More recent German encyclopaedias have removed Bulcke from their pages entirely. If Bulcke surfaces at all, his name is now more prominently connected to that of the Expressionist poet Paul Zech, whom Bulcke publicly but without consequences accused of plagiarism.

<sup>58</sup> A 1913 oil painting by the Impressionist painter Lovis Corinth, “Suitors in Battle with Ulysses,” from the “collection of Dr. C. Bulcke, Berlin,” is now part of the collection of Kunsthalle Bremen and listed at [http://www.kunsthalle-bremen.de/kunsthalle\\_inhalt/sammlung/gemaelde\\_listen/CD.html](http://www.kunsthalle-bremen.de/kunsthalle_inhalt/sammlung/gemaelde_listen/CD.html).

<sup>59</sup> As an example for the fleeting fame of literature valued during its contemporary incarnation, the fate of Bulcke’s books might serve as a particularly noteworthy one. Despite his numerous publications in his lifetime, none are available in the prestigious archive for German literature, the *Deutsche Literaturarchiv* in Marbach, where his name is listed only in conjunction with the correspondence archives of other authors. Cf. the online *DLA* catalogue <http://www.dla-marbach.de/startseite/index.html>. Very little about Bulcke’s life or his work can be sufficiently

died, either on February 2 or 24, 1936, at the age of 60, is unclear and the fact that even the date of his death cannot be easily confirmed attests to the facile indifference with which his life has faded from the records, a sentimental predicament that might best be paraphrased by an allusion to the title of one of his last novels, namely, “and thus you spend your brief days” (*Und So verbringst Du Deine Kurzen Tage*).

Since Lang would be familiar with the constitution of the censorship board and very much aware of the negotiations required in determining which material was to be included and which sequences were to be excised, his directorial choices for *Dr. Mabuse* are telling. Moreover, Lang’s penchant for insisting on the integrity and coherence of his films, as well as his reluctance to negotiate for editing compromises, would indicate that he would have been inclined to probe the limits of the censorship board. When the initial censorship evaluation, on May 17, 1922, as chamber V, number B5827, agreed to allow exhibition of *Dr. Mabuse, Der*

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confirmed. Of his literary works, a few are available in libraries or in used book stores, but most of them follow the sentimental predicament explained above that is echoed in the paraphrasing of the 1930 title of a late novel of his “and thus they spend their brief days.” In any case, as far as is discernable, Bulcke seems to have written at least ten novels, four volumes of novellas, published two individual volumes of poetry, and selected travel writings. His poems were occasionally anthologized. My research indicates that his novels are *Ein Altes Haus* (1898), *Treibsand* (1900), *Das Tagebuch der Susanne Övelgönne* (1905), *Silkes Liebe* (1906), *Die Reise nach Italien; Oder, die Drei Zeitalter* (1907), *Die Trostburgs* (1910), *Ein Mensch Namens Balzereit* (1920), *Und So Verbringst Du Deine Kurzen Tage* (1930), and *Tapferer Cassio* (1930). Among his novella volumes are *Die Süße Lilli/Der Trauerflor* (1911), *Die Arme Betty* (1914), *Katharina* (1918), *Die Schöne Frau Schmelzer* (1919), and *Nikoline von Planta* (1930). His two volumes of poetry are *Die Töchter der Salome* (1901) and *Gedichte* (1905). Evidently he also wrote a novel on student life entitled *Schwarz-Weiß-Hellbrün*. A posthumous work of travel writing, *Die Rote Zauberinsel Helgoland*, was published in 1938.

*Spieler, 2. Teil. Inferno*<sup>60</sup> with the insistence on the modifications of two drinking scenes and a battle sequences with its accompanying titles, the production company appealed this decision on the spot. This appeal is noteworthy and rather puzzling because it indicates how fervently the production company insisted on particular scenes and images and suggests Lang's deliberate involvement in maintaining the integrity of his film.

The board had merely taken offense at two aspects of the film. It reprimanded the film for two early "brutalizing" sequences of a drunken orgy with Mabuse and his henchmen, as well as the interior scenes of the final street fight between the police and the barricaded henchmen because they showed them operating with impunity from inside Mabuse's hideaway. Therefore, the board found, the sequence frivolously depicted the ease with which a handful of criminals could keep police and military authorities at bay from a single domestic dwelling in a dangerous and unacceptable manner, which constituted both a "brutalizing effect" and a "threat to public order and safety."<sup>61</sup> The board declared that the drinking sequences were to be excised and the

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<sup>60</sup> An inherent characteristic of the work with archival material is that the marginalia tend to stand out in more prominent relief. As the documents have lost their immediate relevance and their use value has faded, incidental aspects such as typography, transcription errors, layout, and punctuation become more starkly visible. So, for example, in the record notification that serves as the caption for the censorship decision: The decision is billed as record *B.5827* for the following: "Betrifft den Bildstreifen 'Dr. Mabuse, 2. Teil Inferno'." (Punctuation transcribed exactly as in original.) Below this, the caption continues categorically, "Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit." While this sentence properly belongs to the film's full title, it stands on its own, without framing punctuation. Orthography seems to become destiny, as the auxiliary title caption is not included within the original quotation marks, and so the official board record acquires its own caption: "A play of people of our times." See <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb069z.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> The original documents of all three decisions, the censorship board's *B.5827* and the two decisions by superior board of appeals *B.27.22*, are available in one file at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb069z.pdf>.

street battle scenes modified to the extent that the intrusion into the hide-out by the authorities and the ultimate defeat of Mabuse's gang would instead be emphasized. Instructions for editing the sequence to this effect were offered. The board requested the elimination of the images of actual shootings, active street fighting, and images of dying law enforcement personnel. It suggested a cross-cutting between images to highlight the fervent preparations of the gang in conjunction with the storming of the hide-out, and specifically allowed the dramatic telephone conversation between state attorney von Wenk and Mabuse in his hide-out with the accompanying titles where von Wenk demands that Mabuse surrender to the forces of the state. With these relatively modest modifications the film was cleared for a general release for adults only. The board did not take exception to any instances of writing or any of the titles as such in the film.

This initial evaluation was chaired and signed by the examiner, a "Fräulein Wachenheim," her last name and salutation only indicating that she was likely a young, and definitely unmarried woman. This is all the more interesting since the presence of a young woman in charge of determining for the public the appropriate elements of a film such as *Dr. Mabuse* runs counter to the conceptualization of the censorship board as an inherently conservative protector of the state's interests and therefore by necessity populated with obediently reactionary civil servants. Since there are no further indications in the documents regarding the full names or even the background of any of the members of the board, there can be no definitive determination of this woman's identity within the scope of this project. It is very likely, however, that the Fräulein Wachenheim in question was the German politician, social worker, and labor historian Hedwig Wachenheim (1891 – 1969).

Wachenheim came from a prominent Jewish banker's family in Mannheim, but had decided early on and against her mother's wishes to study in Berlin at the Soziale Frauenschule, the "Social School for Women," founded by the revolutionary social reformer and prominent economist Alice Salomon (born 1872 in Berlin and died 1948 in New York). As a student, Wachenheim was already active in the Social Democratic Party SPD as well as engaged in the care and welfare work for disabled war veterans. In 1919, she was a founding member of the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt*, a charity organization devoted to the social care and welfare of workers as well as to workers' rights. In such an official capacity, she would certainly have been qualified to preside on decisions as a member of the censorship board, in particular because of her accreditation as someone professionally active in public welfare work. Wachenheim was forced to emigrate in 1933, first to France and England, and then in 1935 to the USA, where she worked occasionally at the New School for Social Research. After the war, Wachenheim returned to Germany with the US Army Government to help with the reestablishment of workers' welfare and the reconstruction of the German social system. In 1951 she went to the University of California at Berkeley to complete her historical study on the German Labor Movement 1844 – 1914.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Hedwig Wachenheim, *Die Deutsche Arbeiterbewegung, 1844 – 1914* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1967). In the introduction to this work, written in New York in August of 1966, Wachenheim reflects on her own involvement in the workers' movement. She states that she joined the Social Democratic Party as a young woman before World War I and became "immediately active," or, as she describes it, "I posted flyers, collected membership dues, was a member of the boards of my town, of my election ward, and my electoral district, held innumerable political speeches in meetings, membership conventions and public gatherings, and was a member of the Prussian Parliament from 1928 to 1933." Cf. "Vorwort" to *Die Deutsche Arbeiterbewegung, 1844 – 1914*, p. vii. She does not, unfortunately, consider her work for the censorship board as worthy of note in this description of service.

Despite Wachenheim's acceptance of the film, the production company, as was its legal right, appealed the decision immediately. After the petition for a reevaluation, the final decision was relegated to the superior censorship board of appeals with Bulcke as chairman for a screening and hearing of the film. This assessment was no longer attended by Wachenheim, but now consisted of Bulcke as the chairman, assisted by a professor for arts and literature, a film industry professional, and two representatives of the *Volkswohlfahrt*, that is, a general institution of public welfare without indicating specifically whether they were, as Wachenheim would have been, part of the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* or the "workers' foundation for welfare." The production company was represented by Lang's lover at the time and his soon to be wife, the screenplay writer Thea von Harbou, who, together with Lang, would have only recently been implicated in the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Lang's first wife.<sup>63</sup> Harbou had

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However, in a reflection on the contributions by the Social Democratic Party to the development of the Weimar Republic, she notes the "significance of the bureaucracy for a modern state system" and its contributions to a "judicious and just welfare state" in regard to "the ability to participate in the administrative structures of the state and, especially, in regard to the voluntary participation in the communities and the institutions of social policy." Cf. to *Die Deutsche Arbeiterbewegung, 1844 – 1914*, p. 619. More biographical information on Hedwig Wachenheim can be found at the website of the foundation for social work that bears her name, the *Hedwig-Wachenheim-Gesellschaft e.V.*, at <http://www.diehedwig.org>.

<sup>63</sup> Her identity and the circumstances of her death subject to much speculation, Lang's first wife, "Lisa Rosenthal," is an abiding mystery in Lang studies. The biographer Patrick McGilligan states that "Lang researchers have tried without success to verify her identity" and there is not a single definitive record that would shed light on either her life or her death. McGilligan suspects that "Lisa Rosenthal" was a pseudonym and that Lang's influential friends were able to cover up her death by a gunshot wound to the chest. Her death occurred probably in early 1921 in Berlin when Lang was already involved in a romantic liaison with von Harbou. It remained an event about which Lang, throughout his life, always insisted that it had been a suicide. There is a certain but not definitive possibility

collaborated with Lang on the script to *Dr. Mabuse* and attended the hearing in her function as the film's "dramaturge." She was accompanied by three other representatives of the film's production company. After a primary hearing, in which a compromise stipulation was offered to the production company advising them to edit the film on its own, but in a manner which would correspond to its artistic and commercial interests and which would take the general reservations of the censorship board into account, the hearing was postponed. When the parties met again, von Harbou screened for the board members a re-edited version of "act six," which contained the battle sequence criticized by Wachenheim, and offered to surrender the negatives of the excised sequences to the censorship board for safeguarding. The superior censorship board of appeals then convened in chambers and announced its final verdict on May 20, 1922 as decision B.27.22. In accordance with the original finding by Wachenheim, the film's application for a public exhibition was granted but restricted to screenings for adults only.

The board, however, revised Wachenheim's prior decision to curtail the depictions of the drunken night of debauchery in Mabuse's hideout because, even though there was "no doubt as to the crudeness of the representation," the scenes would not linger in viewers' memories but "disappear," given the film's "extraordinary multiformity" in its "totality effect."<sup>64</sup> In contrast to this license on artistic grounds, the board reversed Wachenheim's decision and announced strong

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that Lang invented the legend of a first wife and her dramatic circumstances in order to embellish his otherwise quotidian life at the time. Cf. Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), especially pp. 56 – 57 and p. 516.

<sup>64</sup> Censorship decision by the superior film examination board of appeals, *Urteil der Film-Ober-Prüfstelle B.27.22* (Berlin, May 20, 1922), p. 6. In the original: "Nach Feststellung der Film-Ober-Prüfstelle ist an der Roheit der Darstellung kein Zweifel. Der Bildstreifen ist aber von einer solchen ausserordentlichen Vielgestaltung, dass diese Bildfolgen kaum in der Erinnerung haften bleiben und jedenfalls in der Gesamtwirkung verschwinden."

objections on two other, newly determined grounds and imposed severe editing restrictions. Above and beyond Wachenheim's reservations against the detailed depiction of the interior sequences because they underscored the ease of insurgence, the superior board opposed the overall screening of several exterior image sequences of the street battle, in particular the depiction of several wounded and slain police officers as well as images of falling and felled soldiers, rising smoke wafting through streets, and images of guns flashing. While Wachenheim had accepted the sequence, but instructed against its narrative thrust of emphasizing the "brutalizing" depiction of individual criminals capable of escaping their "just punishment" by keeping the forces of authority in check,<sup>65</sup> she had also cautioned against invoking the memories of recent events. The representation of street battles, she had found, hinted at the street insurgencies of three years before, which, while perpetrated on the basis of "other motives" as Wachenheim acknowledged, had the potential to "introduce a different momentum into the excitement of the film"<sup>66</sup> by eliciting acts of memory that were just beginning to fade. Since the scenes "were reminiscent of these agitated times"<sup>67</sup> they should not be included, because, as she phrased it, "the public has only recently been appeased in this respect."<sup>68</sup>

These reservations were the only aspects that Wachenheim had admonished the film for. In stark contrast, the superior board of appeals, chaired by Carl Bulcke, declared that it was willing to accept the relevance of the sequence for general dramatic compositional purposes. However, the board conceded that, "thematic and narrative necessity notwithstanding, ... the

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<sup>65</sup> Censorship decision *B.5827* (Berlin, May 17, 1922), p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



realism of the representation appeared so excessively drawn out that this excess was able [*sic*] to incite rousing recollections of the circumstances that befell Germany after the restructuring of the state system and that have persisted in the memory of all the living.”<sup>69</sup> For the sake of public order the number of images and sequences cited by the board were to be removed from the film’s prints. An interesting linguistic shift occurs in the reformulation of Wachenheim’s original objection as she noted the similarity to recent events. Wachenheim’s observant reaction becomes the basis on which an excessive effect of realism is postulated. Even after allowing for a sense of immediacy that could have had a profound impact on the board members’ experience of the film as well, this emphatic registration of the inciting and “exciting” excess of “realism” seems to run counter to the supposed authoritative sobriety of the board of appeals and itself appears somewhat excessive.

The use of the modal verb *konnte* is therefore all the more remarkable here, since its use in place of *könnte* is syntactically incorrect for postulating a potential effect. While we can attribute this umlaut absence to a typing error, it is noteworthy because it changes the intended meaning of the sentence. Instead of finding that the sequence could *possibly* (*könnte*) remind public viewers of recent turbulent events and thus needed to be excised, the sentence reads that it *was* able to effect this recollection (*konnte*) and so had already achieved an actual effect during its screening. The board is ostensibly concerned with any detrimental effects this sequence could potentially generate for the viewing public on whose behalf the board makes its decisions. But here, despite the abstract use of a depersonified grammatical nominalization of the experience of

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. In the original: “Doch erschien der Realismus dieser Darstellung so ausgiebig breit, dass diese Ausgiebigkeit aufreizend an Zustände erinnern konnte [*sic*], die sich in Deutschland nach der Umgestaltung des Staatswesens abgespielt haben und in der Erinnerung aller Lebenden haften geblieben sind.”

memory or the potential for eliciting it, the representatives for the protection of the state in fact concede that they were made to recognize their own recollection of a state in crisis by the film, since, apparently, “this excess *was* able to incite rousing recollections” in the personal memories of the board members. At the same time, the superior board’s decision is based in reference to the prior decision and thus lets Wachenheim’s memory function as the subjectified instance of a public memory. In its declaration the board, in fact, states that residual traumatic turbulences are persistently lingering in a public memory and that the sequence is apt to activate their experience again. Yet, the board maintains that these memories will only be incurred by the potential viewing public in whose name the decision is formulated.

This insistence on the removal of a traumatic experience of memory is also tied to the decision to remove two titles within the film, instances that had not even been brought to attention or deemed worthy of note by Wachenheim’s findings. While the prior editing decision is concerned with the trauma of violence in its accumulation through the overall effect of the image sequences and the brutalizing effect of memory, now there are two specific instances of writing to which the censorship board of appeals objects vehemently. The second basis for the board’s censorship decision therefore concerns the use of writing in the film in relation to a notion of effect that seeks to minimize the trauma of experience as rendered in abstract written form. In their decision to ban intertitle 11, the urgent address to a weakling voicing the crude appeal “Friss Kokain, Schlappschwanz” (“eat cocaine, you limp dick”), constituting an utterance cross-cut with the shootout between the police and the army outside and Mabuse’s henchmen inside and which is directed at a gang member who is tempted to surrender, the impotence of the authority figures of the police is indirectly alluded to as well because it emphasizes their impotence at that very moment of excitement.

The lengthy battle sequence, in which the title occurs, takes place over an entire block of city streets as Mabuse, three of his cronies, and a gangster moll, Fine, shoot out of windows with increasing frenzy and kill a number of soldiers and police officers. When the army reinforcement troops arrive, they lob hand grenades against the barricaded entrances and are finally able to storm the house in a scene that is staged to suggest soldiers going “over the top,” that is, with uniformed and thus indistinguishable figures leaping across barricaded and obstacle-ridden trenches into a territory occupied by the enemy. In this visually well-choreographed sequence, the spatial construction of the street battle is effectively counterposed with the scenes from inside the building, a directorial decision that Wachenheim questioned. Lang even manages to inset a brief instance of writing that serves as a self-congratulatory signature to his visual style when he films soldiers mounting their attack from a street corner so that their silhouettes are illuminated by the morning light through the gun smoke. The soldiers are crouching next to a store sign that reads *Photographie* (“photography”), an inscription that renders explicit the photographic construction of this image and highlights its own pictorial status as a photographic record by spelling this out literally within the image.<sup>70</sup> In this mayhem, Mabuse’s gangster moll Fine, with

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<sup>70</sup> Despite Elsaesser’s impatience with reading Weimar cinema as a tapestry of coded clues, there is in this same sequence an element of writing in the production design that cannot be explained adequately by recourse to degrees of visual verisimilitude. An advertisement on one of the storefronts depicted in the battle sequence announces the written words *Hapag Loyd Office* [*sic*] on its walls. This is remarkably puzzling on at least three different registers. First, it uses the English word “office,” despite its apparent Berlin setting (another store, by contrast, is marked as the victuals store of Knut Rattje, a quintessential name for a Berliner). Secondly, it misspells the name *Lloyd*. There may have been a deliberate effort to include English words in the production design for a possible international circulation of the film or to invoke a Western setting because the fierceness of the battle might suggest an American production. Thirdly, there was indeed a major company named *Hapag*, the name of an Atlantic shipping line

a rifle in her hand, crudely yells at Mabuse's secretary Spoerri, who is too shell-shocked to continue shooting, that he should "chew on some cocaine," which he proceeds to do, fumbling with the powder as he takes it out of his pocket. Momentarily invigorated and beyond himself with the aid of the drugs, he picks up his rifle again and continues to shoot at the authorities.

In general, objections to intertitles as such were not particularly common occurrences. Most often, when titles are mentioned as grounds for censorship decisions they involve the accompanying image sequences to which the titles are complementary references. In this instance, however, the title itself is admonished as unsuitable. Another title in a later scene, when Spoerri is interrogated by von Wenk, refers to Spoerri again as a "Schlappschwanz" as well but this instance was not singled out for reprimand by the board, despite its obvious reference to sexual impotence again. Nor would the reference to cocaine have been enough to cause offense, since very early on in the first part of the film Spoerri is identified as Mabuse's cocaine-addled and effete assistant. The definitive reconstructed version of the film, completed by the Bundes-Filmarchiv, Berlin, and the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung, Wiesbaden, in 2000, accurately

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founded in 1847. As an acronym for Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-AG, it was a well-known company for transatlantic travels and transcontinental shipments. One of its major competitors was the Bremen-based *Norddeutsche Lloyd*, also known as just *Lloyd*. These two companies ultimately merged a few decades after the release of the film to become the global shipping and logistics enterprise *Hapag-Lloyd*, but this merger did not occur until 1970. Given how much Lang has been celebrated as a prophetic visionary, one might as well include this fortunate coincidence of industrial soothsaying along with his other "predictions." Finally, however, there was at the time a successful Bremen company for automobile parts called Hansa-Lloyd-Werke, which would later become the renowned Borgward car company, so the set design signs may have been constructed to suggest a slightly fictionalized brand name here.

places the intertitle at the exact position at which it is identified in the censorship decision.<sup>71</sup> The remarkable occurrence of the title lies in the fact that it appears after the images of a smoke-filled street and fire, but prior to the image sequence which reveals the woman speaker who is the one to utter these words.

The appearance of the title is thus not immediately attributable to a particular person and appears on-screen *before* anyone can be identified as a speaker, which violates the convention of intertitles being shown in between the images to which they properly belong, that is, interrupting a sequence of images of speakers in their duration. The title appears without warning during an intense moment of fighting, with images shown from the point of view of the battling soldiers. As such, then, the title functions as a statement that is uttered without a referent and lingers dangerously on the screen, as a command directed at no one and anyone at the same time, while the excitement of the battle scene is building. This startling effect is most likely the reason the censorship board rejected the title as such and demonstrates how carefully Bulcke had assessed the film, since he had noticed the unusual deployment of the title and its free-floating direct address to the spectator. One other instance of writing underscores Lang's compositional skill in this respect and serves to illustrate further how Lang and Bulcke seemed to define each other in a complimentary relationship where the director as craftsman finds in the state attorney his exemplary audience that is proficiently skilled in recognizing and "reading" the artistic elements of the filmic composition. It occurs right after the second use of the title "Schlappschwanz," which is not considered a cause for concern. The writing appears on-screen after the house has been stormed and Georg, the beastly henchman of Mabuse, worries in prison that Spoerri, the

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<sup>71</sup> Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler*. 2 DVD-set, Munich: Transit Film GmbH, 2004, 270 min.

“limp dick,” will reveal Mabuse’s whereabouts while he is interrogated by a gentle but determined von Wenk.

The title that follows, however, is singled out for reprimand along with its related images. In this case it is one in which the intertitle, in fact, accentuates an act of writing performed in the image. The act of writing shows Georg in prison, defiant to the end, as he paces up and down in his prison cell. He takes off his suspenders, but before he ties them to the bars of the cell’s window, he pauses, finds a piece of chalk in his pockets, and begins to write on the wall of his cell. He scrawls in large letters the words “Götz von Berlichingen,” diagonally onto the wall before he proceeds to busy himself with his suspenders in order to commit suicide. Wachenheim makes no mention of this instance of writing as objectionable, but Bulcke’s decision finds that the writing on the wall, both in the image sequence itself and through its replication as title 21, needs to be removed. The depiction of the subsequent suicide, he determines, is acceptable. The reasons he gives are, in fact, the same reasons that have been asserted in the demand for the removal of the street insurgency sequence, namely, an undesirable effect of imprinting itself into memory, which constitutes an act of brutalization. Using the selfsame language employed for the first sequence to which he took exception, Bulcke notes the extraordinary quality of the sequence and writes that the title, “due to its abnormal nature, is liable to persist in the beholder’s memory in a brutalizing manner.”<sup>72</sup> As he emphasizes the explicit brutalizing effect that this sequence will impose on the memory of its viewers, the criterion that Bulcke asserts here is the persistence of a brutality effect that imposes itself on a fragile memory. This criterion is exactly the same

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<sup>72</sup> Censorship decision *B.5827*, p. 7. In the original, “diese Darstellung ist geeignet infolge ihrer Ungewöhnlichkeit, im Gedächtnis des Beschauers verrohend haften zu bleiben.” The use of the word *Beschauer* for film viewers is, like its counterpart term *beholder*, rather unusual in this context.

one invoked in the objections to the street battle sequence and points to the importance that this writing sequence conveys to the board members.

In its use of the name “Götz von Berlichingen” the writing in the image ingeniously uses writing itself to emphasize its status as a code. What the writing encapsulates as an image, therefore, is the referential quality of writing itself and the necessity to view the writing as a coded clue. The name is a direct reference to the title of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s 1773 historical drama *Götz von Berlichingen mit der eisernen Hand*, an early work by the young Goethe, loosely based on the autobiography of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Swabian knight Gottfried von Berlichingen. The play dramatizes von Berlichingen as a knight of honor who is outlawed because of a feud with the Bishop of Bamberg. While von Berlichingen is loyal to the Emperor, he becomes a champion of the poor and the play follows his subsequent demise as one of the last noble men in a time of drastically changing power structures. As the reluctant leader of a populist farmers’ uprising, von Berlichingen dies in the peasant war, embracing liberty while he cautions against a new era that will bring “times of deception,” as he is bemoaned with the words, “woe to the century that rejected you” and “woe to a posterity that misjudges you.”<sup>73</sup> As one of Goethe’s earliest works, the play’s subject matter may have been radically provocative at the time, but the play itself is perhaps by now considered a minor work of Goethe. However, it has become notorious and enduring in the popular imagination for one particular reason, namely for a line of dialogue that occurs in Act III, scene 16, uttered by the besieged von Berlichingen in response to the demands by imperial troops that he surrender. Von Berlichingen replies to a soldier outside his tower, “tell your Captain: For Your Imperial Majesty, I have, as always, my

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Götz von Berlichingen mit der Eisernen Hand. Ein Schauspiel*, Act V, Scene 14, in *Goethes Werke in Sechs Bänden* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1952), p. 160. (Translation mine.)

due respect. As for him, though, you tell him, he can lick me in the ass.”<sup>74</sup> The stage instructions specify that at this point von Berlichingen slams his window shut and the scene ends.

The writing of “Götz von Berlichingen” on the wall is an obliquely coded reference, which nonetheless appeals to the explicitly common popular knowledge of this particular invective from the play, which most often is reduced only to the anatomical vulgarity it invokes. Moreover, the line is frequently misapprehended under the assumption that von Berlichingen’s startling use of off-color language is directed at the highest authorities of the Emperor and therefore a profound manifestation of irreverence against all authority figures. In fact, the remark is couched in a declaration of respect, duly professing loyalty to the court, even as this assertion is accompanied by a profanity of stupendous degree. Lang’s inclusion of the brief segment that encapsulates the sentiments of one of Mabuse’s henchmen towards authority is telling, whether he was aware of the original context or whether he had assumed that it was a generally irreverent expression of contempt towards authority. Bulcke’s response in this regard is therefore “appropriate” because he recognizes that the writing emphasizes the explicit brutalizing effect that this sequence will induce for the viewers. The brutality, however, lies in the coding that references another dimension of meaning, and this coding is so exceptional that it threatens to persist in memory. The signature of the name inscribed into the image is enough to mobilize the

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<sup>74</sup> Goethe’s original manuscript of the play contains the full line of dialogue: “Sag deinem Hauptmann: Vor Ihrer Kaiserliche Majestät hab ich, wie immer, schuldigen Respekt. Er aber, sagt ihm, er kann mich im Arsch lecken.” Subsequent editions include only the passage “er kann mich -- -- --,” as does the 1952 edition *Goethes Werke in Sechs Bänden* cited above, p. 127. (Translation mine.) Most native speakers of German, however, even those unfamiliar with Goethe’s work, would be able to fill in the blanks. Philologists, undoubtedly, have explained Goethe’s idiosyncratic use of this invective which specifies the anatomic command as “he can lick me *in* the ass” as opposed to the more common “on the ass” (*am Arsch*), but this trajectory lies beyond the scope of this project.



knowledge of a profanity that would fall outside the realm of representation, but it also references a discursive association with peasant uprisings, and, moreover, challenges the very legitimacy of an authority charged with the enforcement of civic exclusion, that is, with the declaration of someone as an outlaw and the subsequent persecution of the banished subject. The writing itself signals its radical status, despite its lexical content. This is a radically different representation from the original novel's depiction of this moment, which, as Patrick McGilligan cites, is coyly rendered as suggesting the usage of the word uttered by one of "Napoleon's generals... after he had lost the battle of Waterloo."<sup>75</sup>

What is embedded in the categorical rejection of this overdetermined instance of writing is the concomitant challenge that has been uttered by Mabuse in a phone call with state attorney von Wenk, who, having summoned the armed forces to the battle as well, now makes an ultimate attempt to speak to Mabuse, on the phone. He is assisted by an eager telephone switchboard operator, when he implores Mabuse to cease his resistance and demands that he surrender to "the

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<sup>75</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, pp. 86 – 87. McGilligan notes that this refers to "le mot de Cambronne," the name of one of the French generals at Waterloo who is said to have uttered "merde" when surrounded by the Duke of Wellington's forces and the approaching Prussian army. Apologists for Cambronne insisted that his utterance was, in fact, "la vieille guard muert, elle se ne rend pas" ("the old guard dies, she does not surrender"), while Cambronne cloaked himself in silence concerning this misunderstanding for the rest of his life. McGilligan here also engages in a kind of Kracauerian *ex post facto* hindsight when he suggests that the scene's writing expresses another ominous reference which renders "that flourish as a political statement and another cinematic augury," since the writing of *Mein Kampf* was begun in the Landsberg prison a year after the film's release. Cf. McGilligan, p. 87.

power of the state,” the *Staatsgewalt*,<sup>76</sup> just prior to the climax of the street battle scenes. As the forces of the state find themselves in a battle over control, Mabuse responds to the state attorney’s demands with the absolutist declaration “I consider myself here as a state within the state, with which I have been in a state of war for a long time.”<sup>77</sup> The title to this declaration was not questioned by Wachenheim, but was actually explicitly allowed in her editing suggestions for the adjustment of the thematic emphasis in the narrative of the brutal street fight between the police and Mabuse’s henchmen who barricade themselves in Mabuse’s house but find themselves surrounded and under siege by the authorities. When von Wenk therefore issues his command to surrender to the authority of the state by invoking its power, he uses the network of communications available to him.<sup>78</sup> Tom Gunning notes that this telephone conversation ultimately indicates Mabuse’s “downfall,” since the “technological web no longer responds to his desires, but carries messages he tries to refuse.”<sup>79</sup> His omnipotence of control has now found

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<sup>76</sup> The original intertitle reads, “Herr Dr. Mabuse, ich fordere Sie auf, der Staatsgewalt keinen Widerstand zu leisten und sich zu ergeben!”

<sup>77</sup> The original intertitle reads, “Ich fühle mich hier als Staat im Staate, mit dem ich von jeher im Kriegszustand lebte! Wenn Sie mich haben wollen, -- -- holen Sie mich!” Versions of the film with English intertitles translate this beginning passage with the lexical equivalent of *fühlen* as “I feel here like a state within a state with which I have been in a state of war for a long time.” This is semantically correct, but the use of the verb “feel” does not convey the categorical sense of autocratic entitlement implicit here in Mabuse’s assertion.

<sup>78</sup> Audience members of silent films skilled in lip reading would have been able to discern that von Wenk says explicitly “Ich fordere sie unverzüglich auf, sich der Staatsgewalt zu ergeben” (“I demand that you surrender to the power of the state without delay”), which precipitates Mabuse’s angry absolutist reply to the state’s intrusion into his space by means of long-distance communication.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 113.

a machinistic limitation because technology intervenes, which, according to Gunning, conforms to Lang's fascination with a concept of destiny as an impersonal force or "Destiny-machine"<sup>80</sup> that works "like a vast switchboard with relays connecting it to all the world's destinies."<sup>81</sup>

In this particular instance, however, Gunning's emphasis needs to be shifted from the concept of a technological grid to the notion of control, articulated as "state power." In the direct confrontation between two competing ideas of the state, Mabuse's against von Wenk's, the state attorney is ultimately victorious because he is assisted in the exertion of control by the female switchboard operator. The network of communication is predicated on her labor, which allows von Wenk to speak directly to Mabuse and assert the "power of the state" as a verbal utterance over the telephone lines, replicated in cinematic technology as writing. Wachenheim issued her decision with the suggestion that the battle should be depicted through the perspective of the authorities' victory by showing the results of the siege. Nonetheless, she specified that in doing so, the telephone conversation was acceptable as representation and should indeed be allowed to be included in the film as part of the battle. To continue in line with the convergence between fictional and factual representation, this fictional state attorney is assisted by another *Fräulein*, in this case, the *Fräulein vom Amt*, or "the office miss," with "office" denoting the "office for telecommunications" or *Fernmeldeamt*. Siegfried Kracauer, whose contributions helped to elevate into consciousness this notion of the female as the "little movie-going shop-girls"<sup>82</sup> in the Weimar public discourse. As Kracauer states in 1927, fictional film and the lies of social life are

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, "Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino," in *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1977), p. 279. (Translation mine.)

mutually dependent on each other, because “pulp film and life are usually complementary, since the typist-missies [*Tippmamsells*] model themselves after the on-screen examples.”<sup>83</sup> Kracauer also wrote about the distorted ways in which the depiction of work by women was represented on the screen, when he notes that working women have generally been portrayed in film as “cheerful young private secretaries or typists who take dictation for the fun of it and do a little typing.”<sup>84</sup> This representation, as he calls it, amounts to a “swindle on the screen,”<sup>85</sup> especially in regard to the psychological demands put on women in an automated and replaceable workforce, and requires a perceptual change to understand the “collective body,” in which can be diagnosed the “connection between individual illness and those of the society at large.”<sup>86</sup>

Kracauer, of course, would no longer have had this brief moment of the film in mind at the time of his writing, but, while the young woman in the telephone switchboard exchange is certainly eager to assist and could therefore be called “cheerful,” her work does enable the state to announce its power through the network of communications that are enabled by women at work such as her. Kracauer’s assessment of working women in film would not have included the switchboard operator, since her appearance occurs for only a brief instance. Kracauer’s focus concerned the overall ideological structures in the cinema, where the film culminates in a marriage to the boss and the girls’ dreams are fulfilled while they subject themselves to matrimony, which has always been a “tested means of transforming them into compliant

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. (Translation mine.)

<sup>84</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Working Women,” (1932) in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 216.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

instruments.”<sup>87</sup> But what is remarkable is the way in which the switchboard operator is integrated here into the overall battle sequence through the editing sequence Lang offers. As the police are surrounding Mabuse’s building, the army attacks through the alleys of Berlin as if they were the trenches of the Western frontlines, and the state attorney enters a private residence to gain access to a telephone. At this moment Lang cuts to the operator, whose work now becomes part of the battle. It is a startling moment of a change of visual registers, because the montage effect suddenly redraws the lines of the struggle, away from the gunshots and explosions on the chaotic street to the calm order of the switch board technology, which locates the ultimate site of control. This technology of communication is not accessible to Mabuse, since he needs to rely on more archaic modes of transmission, such as hypnotism, illusion, coercion, or manipulation of knowledge.

The final ability of the state attorney to rely on the switchboard operator at his disposal, a request for a service that was available and that could be replicated by any citizen with access to a telephone, initiates the demise of Mabuse, who will take refuge in his forgery workshop, which had enabled him to manipulate the circulation of money for a time and exert his challenge to the sole existence of the state. At this point, therefore, the operator now is equal in importance for the ability of the state to announce its power through long-distance transmissions, which rests with her in her professional role in the same way that the army and police are manifesting the state’s might on the streets.<sup>88</sup> Lang’s directorial signature works very effectively in such

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>88</sup> A few years later, Erich Kästner (1899 – 1974), the popular author of a best-selling German children’s detective story, would use this trope of the telephone operator as the crucial guarantor of justice again in a more playful way. His 1929 novel *Emil und die Detektive*, in which a group of youngsters hunt down a pickpocket on the streets of

moments of change and he succeeds in introducing a logical element to the resolution of the film through images rather than the narrative. It is the collaboration in concert of the state's structures of authority, from the military to the attorney to the switchboard operator, that prevail in the end and determine Mabuse's destiny. When the house is finally stormed, Fine and another gangster have been killed, while Mabuse escapes through the city sewer canals. Mabuse's raging driver Georg has to be subdued by a number of men and is led away to prison, where he will kill himself, but not before threatening Spoerri to keep secret Mabuse's hideout location. Von Wenk, however, approaches the trembling Spoerri and gently coaxes him into revealing Mabuse's escape plans with his skillful interrogation techniques and the strategies of empathy employed for such purposes.

Mabuse ends up in his forgers' den on the verge of insanity and he becomes haunted by the apparitions of his past. Trapped by these visions, Mabuse begins to see the instruments of forgery become ghost machines that encroach on him as well the ghosts of the dead, and he goes insane, surrounded by worthless scraps of paper that were once the means to the exertion of his power. Gunning illustrates this scene effectively as the moment where the apparatus that Mabuse has summoned turns against him. As Gunning describes the scene, Mabuse is confronted by all that he was able to manipulate before, but "[a]ll these things now confront him and declare their independence from him," so that he becomes "their subject now, no longer their enunciator."<sup>89</sup>

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Berlin, features a character named "little Tuesday," or "der kleine Dienstag." Because he is the youngest and smallest member of the group he is instructed to wait by the telephone, in case the group needs to coordinate its operations, despite his desperate pleas to join his older friends in the chase. At home, Dienstag falls asleep next to the telephone, but his towering importance as the communications operator in charge is later celebrated at the conclusion of the book.

<sup>89</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 116.

On a visual level, however, this reversal is achieved because of the concerted effort the state's instruments of power. This is visually emphasized as a battle in which the images of frenzied soldiers and the calm efficiency of the female switchboard operator correspond to the same articulation of power. The orchestration of this effect is one which Lang constructs very carefully in this sequence and he finds in both Wachenheim and Bulcke two professional first viewers who are adequately responding to his work and register the finely tuned manipulations in his technique far too well for Lang's filmic vision to remain unchallenged, in particular for his visualization of the street battle.

Gunning notes the intriguing effect of the film's final intertitle that accompanies the end of the hunt for Mabuse, which Gunning invokes by stating that the "man who could manipulate and transform his identity ends up without one - the man who *had been* Mabuse."<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the intertitle ominously declares "the man who once was Mabuse..."<sup>91</sup> as an announcement before presenting Mabuse on screen as a helpless, stammering fool surrounded by his worthless forgeries, which he tries to collect and organize in vain. The dramatic reduction of a master manipulator to a helpless invalid is a powerful image, but even more so in the conjunction with the tense shift as announced by the title. The title's evocation of the name that used to instill fear is once again one made without reference to an individual speaker. It is the film itself, commenting for the viewer, that utters what we see before us "had been" Mabuse once. This temporal reversal, in which the name is retroactively removed from the subject on the screen, emphasizes the importance of utterance again or the power that Mabuse once possessed as, in

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>91</sup> Original title: "Der Mann, der Mabuse war..." ("the man who was Mabuse...").

Gunning's term, the "grand enunciator."<sup>92</sup> At this point the film fuses again with the power of the state to declare the subject's identity and has thus cathected the power of articulation back with the film as itself the final medium of technology. The force that Mabuse's name once evoked has now been removed and transferred to a different power, which erases his name before he is arrested as a mere individual and a subject. This instance of a title without referent does not elicit any mention or concerns from the censorship board because it confirms the state's prerogative. In fact, the temporal shift is noteworthy for one other reason, because it could put into perspective the unusual grammatical tense shift we find in Bulcke's appeal to the memories that the film was able to invoke in the board as discussed above.

Given that the language he uses in his decision is phrased in the indicative rather than the conjunctive mood, as discussed above and paraphrased as "the film *was able* to evoke memories," the final title might have had a lingering effect beyond the film itself. Since decisions were declared as fact-findings after screenings, we can read the faint echoes of the temporal shift in the title that the film deploys replicated in Bulcke's decision. Prompted by the assistance of Wachenheim, Bulcke's decision on the appeal follows the legal logic of Wachenheim and makes her observations the structural basis for his own. In their conjunction, therefore, both appear to collaborate in the same manner that their filmic counterparts are represented as state attorney and switchboard operator. As if she recognized her role in this process of asserting the fact that the state does not tolerate a challenge to its legitimacy, as Mabuse insists on doing, Wachenheim anticipates the proper legal challenge to Lang's film and her criteria are then replicated and confirmed by Bulcke's modified decision in response to the appeals challenge by Lang's production company and von Harbou.

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<sup>92</sup> Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 107.



In this cooperation, “Fräulein Wachenheim” prepares the groundwork for the evaluation of the film and she is therefore, in fact, its “first responder,” as the woman viewer who is at the controls of what forms of communication a film may transmit to audiences waiting to become its recipients and the one who enables the state’s civil servant to fulfill his role as the regulatory enforcer of these audiences to be. What Wachenheim does not notice as objectionable is, in turn, enumerated and remedied by Bulcke, whose interest as an author in the tutelage of young women is well-documented through the titles of his fictional work. As her superior, the appeals decision thus reads as much as a fact-finding evaluation as a pedagogical instance of instruction in the discipline of argumentation for the appropriate modes of determining instances of censorship. While the public welfare worker Wachenheim, for example, is more concerned with the detrimental effects of depicting alcohol intoxication, Bulcke shifts her attention to other instances in which moments of brutalization can be established for the film. What is more important, Bulcke’s decision asserts, is the writing that results in a quintessential refusal of subjectivization. Georg the henchman is professing his ultimate loyalty to a different, extralegal authority over and against the state system of justice by taking his own life and “signs off” on this act of rejection with a direct insult to the authorities. Likewise, the written reference to impotence is to be excised. Here is where the state needs to interfere on behalf of its subjects, Bulcke’s decision makes clear, because the writing stands out as unusual and addresses its actual evaluating audience in ways that need to be curtailed and regulated before it can be made public. After his final intervention, the film was edited to the board’s specifications and had its elaborate Berlin premiere a few days later, on May 26, 1922.

The importance here, as this internal legal discussion on the pages of the censorship documents makes clear, is that the representations of the state are refracted through its initial

audience, which is comprised only of the board members. In turn, the film reflects back the authority of the state in its manifestations on the screen, which are then parsed and evaluated by the state representatives before they become an event for the public. The on-screen work by the fictitious advocate of the state has been replicated by its actual representatives. While Christine Kopf focuses on the “public persona” of the audience as it is constructed through the decisions of the censorship board, another dimension is created in which the experience of film by the board members becomes a record of these effects as official declarations. Christine Kopf quotes a contemporary account of this audience construction in her essay on the practice of film censorship. Kopf cites a 1931 polemic by the film and theater critic Wolfgang Petzet (1896 – 1985) entitled *Verbotene Filme*, in which he characterizes the average viewer reflected by the censorship board decisions. The viewing entity as postulated by the boards “is a strange creature,” writes Petzet, “which unites in itself the mentality of a citizen of the German metropolis, the German city, and the German village.”<sup>93</sup> After listing numerous contradictory qualities of this “mysterious entity” of the average viewer, Petzet states that the members of the evaluation boards only “know for certain that despite its amazing versatility, it is unfortunately foolish and misunderstands completely everything they themselves understand and evaluate correctly without fail.”<sup>94</sup>

But corresponding to this fictitious entity, which is constructed through the illusion of certainty as ascertained by the board decisions, there is a counterpart of a viewer that the films themselves postulate and that is reflected by the board members as viewers. This “entity” is even

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<sup>93</sup> From Wolfgang Petzet, “Verbotene Filme. Eine Streitschrift,” (Frankfurt, 1931) as referenced in Christine Kopf, “Der Schein der Neutralität.”

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

more elusive and illusively constructed and it manifests itself only at those moments when the censorship board takes umbrage at the effects addressed to them directly via the images or titles speaking to them. These are the moments when the censorship board members reveal themselves in the responses to the films as viewers in and of themselves rather than as the sober relays guided by an analytic paternalism that concerns itself only with the potential constructions of audience members mediated by the images. When, therefore, a film like *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* succeeds in persisting in the memory of the authority figure of Bulcke and this persistence is recorded through an official document, there is indeed an exchange at work that no longer benefits from such divisional categories as fact or fiction and a figure emerges which Elsaesser would again label as a “Möbius strip.”

The irony, to invoke another figure of reversal, does not end here, however. Since the duration or persistence of film as a medium at the time was so short-lived, the meticulous care with which the censorship boards documented the plots, recorded the titles, and provided vivid descriptions for the archival records becomes itself a memory of the cinema. Their records endured, so that the definitive reconstruction of Lang’s film, for example, relied heavily on the censorship materials. As the DVD edition states, “all missing, erroneous, or unusable titles were reconstructed with the help of the censorship card.”<sup>95</sup> The bureaucratic efficiency of the censorship board thus guarantees the accurate reconstruction of films and provides a record of films that are no longer extant as well. In the symptomatological obsession of Weimar scholarship with historical clues and fragments, the traces of bureaucracy are outlined both in the film’s nascent state before it becomes a public event, in its fictional representation on the screen, and in its eventual resurrection as a reconstruction from the archives. Moreover, because the film

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<sup>95</sup> Credits *Fritz Lang’s Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler*, DVD-Set, disc 1.

has managed to portray the work of the state in its fictional representation, its examination by the agents of the state becomes a replication of these representations instantiated and disguised as an official act of fact-finding.

Whether this correspondence can be based on Lang's ironic sense of humor, resulting from his awareness of the decision practices of the film censorship board, which he knew would take issue with numerous sequences in his film, or whether this must be regarded as an uncanny fit between actual and cinematic history is a moot point, *pace* Elsasesser's cautionary inveighing of the impermissibility of moving between fictional and factual boundaries in the analyses of Weimar cinema. Most commentaries on *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* certainly do not fail to find significant contemporary similarities between the figure of Mabuse and the political crises faced by the Weimar Republic in its early years, with historical events correlating directly, for example, with Mabuse's attempt to subvert the economic stability of the state through artificial attempts of inflation or in the street fights between the police forces and Mabuse's militia that uses the cinematic imaging of the Spartacist uprisings against the legitimacy of the power of the state.

It is thus very obviously evident for Fritz Lang scholarship that he based his films in immediate response to actual political situations and masterfully integrated these into his works under the guise of public entertainment, a sentiment that Lang, who was prone to self-aggrandizing narratives and anecdotes, did not dispute but actively attempted to maintain throughout his life. The possibility of an explanatory vector in another direction, namely that in the film *Dr. Mabuse* such correlations as imaginary cinematic rearticulations of a national threat can also be located in the obverse representative figure of the state, is seldom ever entertained. Perhaps, apart from the fantastic dimension through which Dr. Mabuse is envisioned as the

antagonist to the rather bland and unblemished sobriety of von Wenk, this is the reason why even a very meticulous study such as Patrick McGilligan's biography of Fritz Lang confuses the role of von Wenk in the film. While Milligan asserts Lang's desire to move his work "out of the realm of the allegorical" in order to personify his film with "the ring of authenticity,"<sup>96</sup> he consistently mischaracterizes the position of von Wenk. Since he alternatively calls the character of von Wenk a "policeman inspector"<sup>97</sup> or a "detective,"<sup>98</sup> McGilligan does not notice the rather bizarre positional title that is assigned to von Wenk, namely that of a *Staatsanwalt*, the professional equivalent of a district attorney, which, in German, however, carries the legal connotation as an "attorney for the state." McGilligan does note in passing that the film's setting curiously has been displaced from Munich and the Bavarian countryside in the novel on which the film was based to the capital, and even though Berlin is not explicitly named in the film as the urban setting, it is the city of Berlin, as McGilligan says, "recognizably so to natives."<sup>99</sup>

This is certainly a relevant change from the original novel *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* by the Luxembourg native and globetrotting traveler Norbert Jacques, which was originally published in serialized form in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* newspaper from September 1921 to January 1922, because it transfers the leap into global exoticism of the novel – from the Alpine countryside to the Brazilian jungle, where in the novel Mabuse plans to build an empire – back to the quotidian contemporaneity of the nation's capital and the center of politics.

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<sup>96</sup> McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, pp. 80 – 81.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82. For a long time, research was impeded by the absence of a definitively reconstructed version of the film and there are a few versions circulating of *Dr. Mabuse* in which the intertitles may have been changed or altered in this regard out of negligence or for translation purposes.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

Jacques' narrative, which in serial form adheres to a specific kind of pulp "literary exoticism,"<sup>100</sup> is now used in the service of a presumably realistic cinematic reportage of daily life, but one where Jacques' idiosyncratic choice to posit the role of the "opponent-in-play"<sup>101</sup> to the diabolic Doctor Mabuse as a neutral district attorney instead of a more glorious representative of the crime-fighting profession remains in keeping with Jacques' fondness for dramatic Manichaeian scenarios. The film allows Rudolf Klein-Rogge, playing Dr. Mabuse, to incorporate the mannerisms of numerous characters in disguise as and thus renders him as a ubiquitous shape-shifting force of avatars, in contradistinction to his counterpart, the clean-cut, stoic, but bland district attorney von Wenk. In this regard, Bernhard Goetzke, who had already been a famous stage actor and had played Death in Lang's 1921 *Der Müde Tod* and who was originally from the city of Danzig,<sup>102</sup> seemed to fit the role of the sober and morally upright law-enforcement administrator von Wenk perfectly. Goetzke was later to be typecast as such a figure of authority,

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. Oliver Ruf, "Segne Mich, Reste Meiner Heimat! Vor 50 Jahren starb Norbert Jacques, der bis heute populärste Vertreter Luxemburger Literatur," in *literaturkritik.de*, no. 9, September 2004, available at [http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez\\_id=7378&ausgabe=200409](http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=7378&ausgabe=200409).

<sup>101</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, p. 86. The term is his translation of the film premier program's description *Gegenspieler*.

<sup>102</sup> As befits a peculiar German preoccupation with stereotypical notions of identity at the time, Goetzke's background would be in keeping with broadly conceived notions of character here. Danzig, first as a Pomeranian and then a Polish port city, was annexed to Prussia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and neighbored the region of East Prussia. Thus it had retained a sense of defiant independence in line with the other prevailing stereotypical notions about the Eastern Prussian qualities of sober-minded practicality and stoicism. Such stereotypes and attitudes would certainly augment Goetzke's star figure in this context.

playing the role of district attorney no fewer than eight times in his active film career, which mainly spanned the years between 1922 and 1944.<sup>103</sup>

Tom Gunning seems to register this intriguing character shift in the figure of justice by pointing out the importance of the formulaic function of the detective story as a sensationalist serial to which the film adheres in this context and distinguishes the film from the “rationalist puzzle”<sup>104</sup> in an economy of signs that characterizes detective fiction as a modernist genre more generally. Even though the film follows the sensationalist structure, Gunning recalls, here as well the figure of “the detective sketches the ideology of modernity” by “simultaneously reflecting a positivist belief in the accessibility of knowledge through close and systematic observation, and new systems of social control through a panoptic system of surveillance.”<sup>105</sup> Because of this emphasis, the state attorney encapsulates such traits, despite the film’s narrative adherence closer to the feuilleton structure of sensationalist serial fiction than the detective fiction genre as such. While he first calls von Wenk “a detective” in line with such observations, Gunning does take note of his peculiar position as a district or “state” attorney. Strangely enough, however, and despite his meticulous and wide-ranging skills of observation, Gunning does not seem to give too much credence to the significance of the character’s title, since his orthography is uncharacteristically inconsistent and careless as it ranges from “state’s attorney” to “States’

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. entry “Bernhard Goetzke” in the online film reference site Internet Movie Database available at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0324553/>. He also continued to perform true to type by playing authority figures such as a professor and a physician numerous times.

<sup>104</sup> Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, p. 89.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

attorney” and back over the course of three pages before settling on the purely nominative “von Wenk” for the remainder of the chapter.<sup>106</sup>

These subtle changes in position emphasize that the confrontation between the representative of the law and the master criminal is indeed not staged with a figure of justice that is in command of extraordinary mental faculties of ratiocination, deductive reasoning, or the ability to interpret symptomatic clues. The importance here lies more in the interplay between protagonist and antagonist as a figuration, because both the novel and the film stage this dualist competition as a battle arrangement between the figure of an existential threat to the system’s stability and order who confronts his corresponding counterpart in the ultimate representative figure of safety and legal justice, which is imagined and rendered as the attorney for the state. Stephen Jenkins already makes this explicit when he discusses the film as a battle for the control of the gaze in both legal and patriarchal terms, so that the primacy of Mabuse’s control of the gaze at the outset ultimately finds its defeat by becoming “himself fixed as the object of the gaze of the Law,”<sup>107</sup> that is, at the moment when he is identified and “Mabuse’s omnipotence is cancelled out by the introduction of the counter-presence of an alternative version of ‘the Law’, the system of legal power, represented here by State Attorney Von Wenk.”<sup>108</sup> Of course, such a rendition neglects the durational dimension of the struggle between the state’s representative and Mabuse over control while at the same time reducing it to an affirmation of the tenets of the importance of the gaze in film, but the constellation of these two antagonistic vectors of force

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106 – 109.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen Jenkins, “Lang: Fear and Desire,” in *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look*, ed. Stephen Jenkins (London: BFI Publishing, 1981), p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.



does suggest that the terrain on which the confrontation is being waged depends entirely on a reliable abstract safeguarding of the legal power of the state as an institution rather than on the concrete procedural skills of law enforcement or the reasoning skills of individual detective work and therefore indicates the stability of the state as a concrete entity as the film's ultimate goal rather than the abstract notion of an order of justice restored.

This battle between an insidious force of harm and the maintenance of stability of the state, its interests represented by its attorney, emblemizes the concerns of the film censorship board in equal measure, albeit not rendered in such theatrical or histrionic terms, and makes it all the more striking that the protagonist of Dr. Mabuse is a state attorney who sacrifices his physical and mental well-being and upon whose body all sorts of temptations, hypnosis, and mechanisms of power are inflicted.<sup>109</sup> In accordance with the *RLG*, Christine Kopf notes the political flexibility of the censorship board and lists a wide range of reasons and interpretations which guided the invocation of the absolute criteria in censorship decisions under the guise of “neutrality.”<sup>110</sup> Kopf makes a special note of the fact that the “early warning system”<sup>111</sup> of the censorship board was consolidated and integrated within the Ministry of Interior by virtue of the fact that a civil servant served as a magistrate, that is, a state-employed administrator was in charge of the board, a condition that was not necessarily specified in the *RLG* laws as such, but nonetheless implemented later on. In all these cases, the representatives became the initial audience of any film and fulfilled their representative function as a substitutional stand-in for the larger public, so that their role as magistrates necessitated a viewing position that imagined a

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<sup>109</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>110</sup> See Christine Kopf, “Der Schein der Neutralität.”

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

range of subjectivities which could be adversely affected by the subject matter and the images. Obviously the censorship materials do not emphasize this sacrificial position as a rule but many of the legal censorship declarations are guided by a sense of responsibility and a sensibility toward the viewer to come.

This stands in stark contrast to the general conceptualization of the film censor as a brute force of reaction who imposes a narrow-minded framework of propriety, guided by an abiding sense of preserving the political status quo, by an obsequious demeanor, and by a fundamentally timid sense of aesthetics. Instead, the members of the censorship board in its early years emerge as refined and idealized film viewers, who enact their role as state representatives of the initial audience through a professional sense of service, where film examination becomes a public duty. Moreover, the debate between two opposing sides of conflict, namely the interest of the public's well-being and the commercial interests of the film industry, is staged as part of the examination process. On this performative dimension, the evaluative criticism of film is imagined as a court proceeding, where all sides are represented by proxy figures. In the case of the film and production companies, for example, they are always represented by a "Frau Mellini," again with no further identifying information ascertainable, in lieu of actual proponents from the film's production. That is, if no one from the film's production is present to assert the interests of the film itself, Frau Mellini acts as the spokeswoman for the petitioner in absentia. Her consistent presence in many of the records becomes a silent confirmation of the relevance of the film industry's attempts to bring their product to the public. As the advocate for their interests, Frau Mellini's name at least guarantees that it remains as a representative stand-in for those in whose name the censorship boards exist in the first place, but it is only the name that remains since none of her actual statements were recorded unless they were issued as a mere gesture of appeal.

The examination procedures followed a strict format, which was legally codified in the documents. First the presence of the interested parties was ascertained and the film screened. This was followed by the *Entscheidung*, the declaration in which the exhibition status of the film was defined, with the potential injunction decrees levied against certain elements and parts. Then the reasons for this decision were given as the *Entscheidungsgründe*. Finally, the relevant fees for the decision procedure were determined. These parts of the censorship decision were recorded and combined so that they could be filed in consecutive order. In case a decision by the censorship board was overruled by the board of appeals, both examinations were included in one document with two separate but consecutive filing numbers issued. The descriptive part of the decision could become very elaborate, with titles and scenes described in meticulous detail over a number of pages. Some of the reasons given were equally elaborate, but even a brief decision would list the length of the film screened and the visual elements on which the decision had been based. All the petitioners who had been at the screenings were listed, but the decision was issued as the sole declaration by the chair of the board. No information of the internal discussion or the reactions during the screenings were relayed, but in very rare instances the decision made references to the particular objections of individual board members in case this objection could be codified as a legitimate legal reason for the decision.

In the cases when titles were part of the reasoning, they were censored because of their relation to the corresponding scenes that were admonished. In the early decisions, the titles were frequently noted in differing terms, so that the title cards that appeared during the film were often referenced in various ways. The general term employed was *Titel* or sometimes *Zwischentitel* (intertitle) and occasionally rendered as the variant *Zwischentext*, but in the early decisions of 1920 other terms such *Hintertitel* (“background title”) in distinction to *Haupttitel* (“main title”)

or even *Untertitel* (subtitle) can still be found before the use of these categories was streamlined.<sup>112</sup> While this might manifest the unregulated early practices of the boards, it also indicates that titles were an element of concern from the beginning until the procedure was gradually defined and the terms of debate settled. However they were referred to, titles were frequently important as such because they were instrumental for the board to determine the tendencies, point-of-view, or sentiments of a film, even when they were evaluated in conjunction with the depictions that the titles accompanied. As such, then, titles in the censorship decisions functioned as clues for the board in order to examine and investigate a film's documentary evidence for its hidden intentions. In rare cases, these intentions became too obvious when titles were censored as titles themselves, as described above, because they indicated a threat as a linguistic utterance. In these instances, the effects of the writing were circumscribed as a discursive problem, so that a title would be "brutalizing" because of its tonal association, its inappropriate evocation of slang, its use of demeaning or flippant language, or, most often, as encapsulating excessive layers of meaning that needed to be regulated. Equivocal meanings or "excessive" uses of language were admonished, most often without explanation except for references to the "times" or when they were declared "brutalizing."

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<sup>112</sup> For an extremely controversial later case, involving the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe* by Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow, the board also deployed the unusual term *Sprechtitel*, or "speaking titles," which might point to the presence of many parties who were not familiar with the usual procedural terms and would explain the different terminology used for the benefit of the lay persons involved. Indeed, sixteen people were present for the initial board of appeals decision, including experts invited by both the censorship board and the film producers, Brecht and Dudow themselves, as well as a "picture reporter" as a representative of the Associated Press. The decision was comprised of 29 single-spaced type-written pages.

During the time that Bulcke was chairman of the board of appeals, most titles were excised for their sexual innuendo or their “crude” references to sexuality, but this practice continued without significant changes when Seeger took over the office. Sometimes the main title of a film needed to be changed, so, for example, that of *Sodom und Gomorrha* (1922) was required to be changed to “Sodom and Gomorrha: The Punishment,” whereas the title “The courtesan of Venice” (*Die Kurtisane von Venedig*, 1924) was itself indicative of a “sexual hypertrophy” and thus needed to be removed.<sup>113</sup> An interesting case involved the title of the 1922 film *Der Frauenmarder* (“Woman’s Marten Fur,” but the title also alludes to “The Murderer of Women”) with Wachenheim in her function as the chair of the examination. The examination resulted in the denial of the use of the title because it presented motivations in a degree that was too specific and the demand was placed that the title be changed to the “Secrets of Dr. Mort.” With this change, however, the film was granted exhibition in the German Reich. Against this decision of the censorship panel, four men and Wachenheim, Wachenheim herself raised objections and appealed as the chair. This constituted a highly unusual procedure because it indicates that the assisting members disagreed with the chair and pleaded for an exhibition permission against the chair’s assessment. When the film was accepted by the board, Wachenheim’s objection automatically moved the final decision up to Bulcke, who intervened and sided with Wachenheim. He declared a prohibition of the film because it depicted “disgusting” instances of foot fetishism and necrophilia.<sup>114</sup>

The titles in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1920 film *The Witch Woman* (*Prästänkan*), originally to be released in Germany as “According to Justice and Law” (*Nach Recht und Gesetz*), but

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<sup>113</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb871z2.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb366z.pdf>.

which was later changed to “The Vicar’s Wife,” contained references to many Biblical allusions that “played a farcical game with the concept of matrimony.”<sup>115</sup> All these objectionable references needed to be removed. A title such as the 1922 *Das Lebensroulette* (“Roulette of Life”) was prohibited for its “depravity,” but the film itself was allowed to be screened because its merit lay in the presentation of “psychological forms of explanation in the subconscious” of an excitable girl, as long as its title was changed to *Das Menschenroulette* (“Human Roulette”).<sup>116</sup> Likewise, The main title of the film *Die Nacht im Grünen Affen* (1922, “The Night in the Green Monkey”) was offensive enough to require a change to the name “The Night in the Black Mouse,” offered as the film’s alternative title by the censorship board of appeal itself. The reasons given, and explicitly specified as mandatory by the appeals board, which emphasized the importance of this change, lay in the fact that the board possessed the knowledge that “names such as ‘green monkey’ or ‘blue monkey’ were nicknames for bordellos among the Middle-German regional population” and thus offered an unacceptable incentive and “tasteless” promise for movie theater visitors.<sup>117</sup> The 1921 rerelease declaration for the film “The Naked” (*Die Nackten*, 1919) was only issued after the demoralizing title was changed to “Sister Martha” and the intertitle “I only know one law, my will” was removed.<sup>118</sup>

Sexual issues sometimes merged with political concerns and the reasoning for the decisions became more complicated, even though the five absolute criteria for censorship offered a broad range for prohibition declarations. For example, in a 1920 decision the film “Hall of

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<sup>115</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb969z.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb943z.pdf>.

<sup>117</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb973z.pdf>.

<sup>118</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb976z.pdf>.

Seven Sins” (*Saal der Sieben Sünden*, 1919) was declared “brutalizing and demoralizing” because it took place in a Chinese-owned bordello, which also provided the opportunity to indulge in other vices such as gambling, lesbian love, and opium consumption, “a slap in the face of any sense of moral decency.”<sup>119</sup> Far from being a clear-cut example for a prohibition declaration because of its “thought-deprived plot,”<sup>120</sup> the film proved to pose a significant difficulty for the chairman of the decision, a police commissioner named Polizeirat Mildner, who did not easily command the argumentation skills of Bulcke or Wachenheim and was confused in regard to his ability to prohibit the film by finding the appropriate grounds for censorship. The bordello activities depicted were obviously demoralizing and brutalizing, Mildner found, but he acknowledged that, even more disturbingly, the location throughout the film was implied to be Germany. Police commissioner Mildner confirmed this with the logic that a title referred to the value of a pearl necklace as “20 000 Mark.” This disturbing currency reference was proof positive that the film took place in Germany and thus provided other grounds to be barred from exhibition, since this distorted depiction of Germany would likely endanger the German foreign relations. For good measure, the police commissioner also worried about the use of a Chinese man as the proprietor of a German bordello, which might result in a wrongful representation of China and “its cultural rituals” (“ihres Kultus” in the original).<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb826z.pdf>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. “Gedankenarme Handlung” in the original.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. This stands in stark contrast to the 1922 Dutch film *Gij zult niet dooden*, (“Though Shalt Not Kill,” released as *War Sie Schuldig?* or “Was She Guilty?” in Germany). In the decision Bulcke admonished the dismissive references in the film to Chinese characters such as the titles “Here friend Chinaman invests his money” or “three solid bangs [*Bumser*] with a hard Chinese skull against the wall and entry is assured.” These were to be removed without doubt, but Bulcke consulted with advisors from the Foreign Office to determine the insults to “the sense of

In this respect, the brevity of the two-page decision, for which the film production company at first did not even bother to send representatives and whose interests in the public exhibition of the film therefore were voiced by Frau Mellini in lieu of their presence, becomes a concise catalogue of confusion, where the police commissioner invokes a number of grounds for censorship and determines it is the foreign reputation of the state that is most at issue here. In the appeals decision the cooler head of Bulcke prevailed, who, having heard the testimony of three experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs because of the police commissioner's concerns, curtly declared that the film was prohibited because of its self-evident status as "trash" that was in and of itself demoralizing to a high degree. Bulcke offered an exemplary line of reasoning that seems pedagogically directed at the confusion of the police commissioner who, in his haste to find the proper decision, immediately makes the representation of the state the main issue. Bulcke, in response, declared that the depiction of Chinese cult rituals and religious ceremonies constituted such "obvious nonsense" that any concern about the danger to Germany's foreign reputation or its foreign relations was irrelevant.<sup>122</sup> Along these lines, Bulcke also reversed the concerns of the censorship board about the use of foreign titles in the 1922 film *Oberst Rokschanin*, which had employed titles in Russian and was at first found to threaten the proper mode of evaluation because the use of Cyrillic letters made the titles illegible to the authorities. Bulcke advised the chamber to consult the counsel of a translator in such cases, since the

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honor" for the Chinese people before allowing the release of the film. See decision at

<http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb709z.pdf>.

<sup>122</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb826z.pdf>. "Offenbare Unsinnigkeit" in the original.



representation of titles in a foreign language would generally constitute the same instance of representation as that of foreign habits and landscapes.<sup>123</sup>

More dangerous were the uses of terms of “incendiary nature” such as “bolshevist,” “Spartacist,” or “bolshevism,” the deployment of which was admonished in the 1921 film *Alarmtopf* by Bulcke who reversed the initial prohibition once these terms were removed,<sup>124</sup> or the more complicated invocation of the conditions of the state in the title for the 1923 film *Hunger in Deutschland* (“Hunger in Germany.”) In a decision by Seeger, a title was found to be a direct and obvious attack “against the current constitutional state and economic system,” as Seeger determined.<sup>125</sup> The film’s original title made the following allegorizing statement, “Reaction, Hunger and Misery marched in unison against the fighting proletariat.” The use of the terms “fighting” and “reaction” was declared by Seeger to be an attack on the current condition of the state by depicting it as an enemy of the working class and thus endangered the public safety and order. The title was allowed by Seeger in the version that he modified for the film, namely, “Hunger and Misery marched in unison against the proletariat.”<sup>126</sup> Seeger was content with documentary depictions of the misery of the proletariat as long as the current form of the state was not indicted by the titles accompanying the representation.

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb996z.pdf>.

<sup>124</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb186z.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb516z.pdf>.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb516z.pdf>. The original document for this decision is no longer extant, but a reconstruction copy is available, which transcribes the term “marched” in error as *marschietren* and invokes a fee list from 1928. It is unclear when exactly the transcript for this decision was made, but the decision itself most likely took place in March 1924, so these two references seem to be erroneous transcriptions.

In contrast, however, Bulcke's legal reasoning was considerably more complicated and counterintuitive in a decision involving the depiction of human trafficking and the prostitution by Polish Jews in Germany. The film *Das Judenmädchel von Sosnowice* ("The Jew Girl from Sosnowice," 1920), apart from concern about its general subject matter, was found to contain "starkly offensive" titles (with deprecating labels such as calling the girl Sarah "Sarahleben" and an ironic use of titles of respect that address characters as "his miss daughter" and "mister son"), which might elicit anti-Semitic sentiments during screenings and were therefore cause for a prohibition by the censorship board. Bulcke reversed the prohibition with the argument that an intended effect such as anti-Semitism was hardly discernable in the film, although he upheld the removal of the titles. The argument Bulcke offered was that the film did not represent German Jews but only Russian-Polish Jews and, moreover, combined two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, Bulcke reasoned, it appeared as if the film "attempted to express an anti-Semitic tendency," but this observation needed to be put into perspective with an effort to solicit a certain kind of compassion. As Bulcke declared, the film at the same time "elicited a kind of social pity for these two foolish and ignorant Russian-Polish Jews."<sup>127</sup>

Here Bulcke's affinity toward sentimental representations of fallen women is paired with a strange conception of a sentiment of empathy that he ascertains in the film viewer, who might pity the suffering of these two characters. The decision is remarkable in the sense that Bulcke manages to allow a film, for which the possibility of anti-Semitism has been raised as the reason for prohibition, by appealing to a viewing position in which the act of film-viewing becomes an act of empathy, which works against the apparent or potential tendency of the film itself. The conception of a viewer here is precisely the opposite of the ignorant, excitable public that is

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<sup>127</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb588z.pdf>.

usually thought to be part of the guiding imaginary that drives the decisions of the censorship board members. Of course, Bulcke's decision could easily be regarded as a cynical legal attempt to make available in public a film that would appeal to audiences predisposed to anti-Semitism. In other cases, however, Bulcke was very careful to prohibit films with anti-Semitic content and even referred to the crisis of the Republic which necessitated emergency laws. In the case of four 1922 political cartoon shorts, subsumed under one of the titles *Ein Modernes Stadtparlament*, Bulcke agreed with the censorship board that the cartoons were anti-Semitic and furthermore asserted that, despite their characteristic cartoon representation which was the legitimate domain of satire, such attacks against the parliamentary system were not acceptable at a time when the Republic itself was under attack and thus required special protection.<sup>128</sup>

As a basis for comparison, Bulcke's vehement argument for a prohibition of a film that invokes similar situations is telling as well. In his decision to prohibit the 1921 film *Gross-Stadtmädels, Teil I* ("The Gals from the Big City, Part I"), his line of argument follows a concept of naturalism and veracity that the film does not live up to, since the film distorts realistic depictions of Berlin which amount to a "social fraud perpetrated against the people."<sup>129</sup> This charge results from Bulcke's observation of the fact that, contrary to real conditions, the film, for example, represents naïve girls subjecting themselves to all sorts of adventures, which culminates in a depiction of a "kidnapped female minor who escapes a dance bar, where she had been forcibly intoxicated with liquor, only to be arrested by the police and be incarcerated indefinitely in an educational home."<sup>130</sup> Since this is a fraudulent representation, Bulcke

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb956z.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb472z.pdf>.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

speculates on the reaction of the audience. As he declares, “judging from experience,” part of the audience will naturally assume this to be “accurate in life, and thus the population’s healthy perspective on life [*Weltanschauung*] will be corrupted and led astray.”<sup>131</sup> The population in this case would presumably not be able to maintain a sense of judgment, but, in fact, would rather welcome such representations since the film’s “trash effects” would be “greeted with pleasure” by the population to its moral detriment.<sup>132</sup>

However, if a certain acceptance of veracity would contribute to the moral blindness of a population which thus necessitated constant vigilance, Bulcke also uses a similar notion of empathy to assert a film’s prohibition. In the case of the 1921 film *Der Roman eines Dienstmädchens* (“The Novel of a Servant Girl”) the line of argument is reversed. Bulcke’s main concern lies in the film’s use of titles rendered in the Berlin regional dialect, because these titles emphasize an undue specificity that would result in the assumption by audience members from other parts of the Reich such as Southern Germany or the countryside that it was a “specific Berlin-like cynicism, frivolity, or brutality that would be to blame for the moral depravity of the times.”<sup>133</sup> If these titles were not specifically associated with Berlin, the film might be permitted for public exhibition. Nonetheless, Bulcke asserts, the film depicts “the tragic fate of the girl with such meticulous accuracy and fidelity that its effect is not merely disturbing but rather tormenting and cruel [*peinigend und quälend*] to a high degree.”<sup>134</sup> Since the crisis of moral depravity is permanent, the appeal to a filmic effect that goes beyond empathy and results in the

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb1060z.pdf>.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

torture and pain of an audience is noteworthy again because Bulcke deploys a notion of filmic effect that postulates a film viewer's response in degrees of reaction. If Bulcke registers a sense of empathy and elicits pity for a Jewish prostitute, the representation is acceptable by virtue of the legal encoding of his assessment in the degrees of his emotional response. Likewise his act of registering the pain and torture inherent in the depiction of the trials and tribulations of a servant girl are excessive enough to prevent the film's exhibition, so that his emotional response to the images becomes the legal basis for the decisions.

Finally Bulcke's sense of judicial empathy as a viewer was taxed and challenged in the decisions regarding two propaganda films designed to instigate anti-French sentiments and stoke a racist imagination in the population, resulting from the French occupation in March 1921 of the Rhein area in and around Düsseldorf, Duisburg in the Ruhrgebiet, as well as the separation of the Saarland from the Reich. For the film *Die Schwarze Schmach* ("The Black Shame" 1921) Bulcke revised the Munich board's decision to permit the film's exhibition and issued a prohibition with an elaborate rumination on the effective use of propaganda. Bulcke concurred with the assessment of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "albeit not without serious reservations, that, in order to prevent inflammatory French propaganda, the impulses for conciliatory relations should originate in Germany."<sup>135</sup> Bulcke refers to an awareness that French authorities permit anti-German propaganda films that are equally inflammatory with titles such as "The Blood Guzzler of Verdun" (*Der Blutsäufer von Verdun*) but nonetheless agrees to a German effort at reconciliation. Again the sentence is worth citing in detail, because it contains another formulation that is incongruous in its rhetorical logic, even though Bulcke's point is obvious, and suggests the difficulty of reconciling the reaction of Bulcke as a film viewer with that of Bulcke

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<sup>135</sup> Cf. decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb849z.pdf>.

as the advocate for the state and its diplomatic relations. Bulcke formulates in an elaborate grammatical construction that ends up contradicting itself, verbatim that

“The chamber concurs with the Foreign Office, albeit not without serious reservations that, if one is to *prevent* the elimination of inflammatory propaganda instigated by France, the impulse for a conciliatory relation must originate from Germany.” (Emphasis mine.)<sup>136</sup>

This is a complicated formulation that ends up codifying a sentiment that precisely runs counter to the legal intention asserted by the decision. Lest Bulcke is faulted too much for revealing his real sentiments in this convoluted linguistic construction, it might be noted that the viewing of this film may have caused considerable excitement that would far exceed that of the one registered in Bulcke’s examination for the screening of *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* a year later. The burden that is incumbent on Bulcke in this case is the issue of how to reconcile the demands of the representatives of the state in its foreign relations with that of his paternal conception of the “unbiased viewer” (*der unbefangene Zuschauer*)<sup>137</sup> as an internal subject within the state. Since the emotional or empathetic effect of the film’s depiction of the French occupation by black soldiers registered in the state representative Bulcke cannot be the basis for his decision, he must find other grounds on which to reconcile his findings with the demands of other state representatives.

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<sup>136</sup> Cf. Ibid. In the original Bulcke’s decision states: “Die Kammer ist, wenn auch nicht ohne schwere Bedenken der Ansicht des Auswärtigen Amtes beigetreten, dass, wenn man in Deutschland der Beseitigung einer von Frankreich betriebenen verhetzenden Propaganda vorbeugen [*sic*] will, die Anregung zu einer versöhnlichen Beziehung von Deutschland gegeben werden muss.”

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

What Bulcke must now resort to is to bemoan the factual use of titles that claim and make assertions that are evidently not accurate. The film asserts that numerous German women and girls were raped by black soldiers stationed in the Ruhrgebiet. Despite Bulcke's acknowledgment of an emotional dimension that the film "expresses the justified outrage against the occupation by the German population"<sup>138</sup> he must resort to a line of argument that allows for the prohibition of the film on factual grounds. By asserting that a propaganda film must by necessity follow the fundamental premise that "despite its compression of events, all occurrences depicted must conform to a fidelity of actual representation and must be verifiably true."<sup>139</sup> In this dilemma between conflicting emotional demands, Bulcke can only point to the inaccuracies and distortions of the film titles that state, for example, that "40 000 black men have been transported to the Rheinland" and one that, in Bulcke's term, "warns" of "new victims of the black shame! There are thousands of them already."<sup>140</sup>

Against these titles directed at instructing the "unbiased viewer," Bulcke ascertains the factuality of the situation, of which he has been apprised by representatives of the Foreign Office. "In fact," Bulcke finds in the reports from the Foreign Ministry, "there are currently only 200 negroes in the Rheinland ... and the current occupation consists not of black troops but of colored troops, namely Arabs and Madagascans."<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, the number of rapes by black soldiers as imagined by the population cannot be confirmed, so Bulcke decrees that it is

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. In the original: "... muss es darüber Aufgabe eines Propagandafilms sein, die von ihm geplante Einwirkung... so einzurichten, dass trotz aller Zusammengedrängtheit der Handlung die die [sic] geschilderten Vorgänge wirklichkeitsgetreu und erweislich wahr sind." (Superfluous repetition in original.)

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

undoubtedly an exaggeration to assert the possibility of “thousands of such rape cases.”<sup>142</sup> The prohibition of the film should therefore be declared on the grounds that the titles claim a factual basis which would evidently contradict the facts. In such constructions Bulcke sees that the desired and intended results of the propaganda achieve two opposite effects, namely a damaging of the reputation of Germany in other countries because its propaganda is demonstrably wrong, and secondly that the exaggerations and assertions might instill in the viewer a sense of doubt that would run counter to the film’s stated intentions.

The topic of the rape of “German women and girls” by black soldiers is one that seems to occupy Bulcke’s imagination throughout these decisions. In some legal cases this trope even became the basis for his argument of allowing the depiction of the violation of women over and against the case for censorship on the grounds of moral deprivation or brutalizing representations.<sup>143</sup> It is all the more remarkable, then, that, against his own impulses, Bulcke

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid. Bulcke’s overall sentiments about the French occupation can be determined in other cases as well. In another prohibition decision for the 1921 film *Die Schwarze Pest* (“The Black Pestilence”) Bulcke notes that the propaganda film cannot be shown categorically because it “derides the institutions of the state.” In his decision, however, he advises that he would have welcomed a propaganda with “a serious and unsentimental depiction of the feeling of shame in humiliation that Germany is suffering through with the occupation of black troops.” Cf. decision at <http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb848z.pdf>. Bulcke did allow a satirical depiction of the occupation, the 1923 film entitled *Das Ruhrkaleidoskop*, because it seemed necessary at the time, albeit with a title change to *Der Neue Napoleon*, since in the reference to the occupied area the caricature could be misconstrued as actual conditions.

<sup>143</sup> For example, in the decision involving the prohibition of the 1922 reissue of the 1919 film *Des Teufels Puppe* (“The Devil’s Doll”), Bulcke notes that value judgments are acceptable in determining a film’s merit for exhibition, since, “for example, the depiction of rape” is not “demoralizing” as such “if the context determines that the victim is



insists on the exhibition ban of both *Die Schwarze Schmach* and *Die Schwarze Pest*, since his own fascination with violations of a woman's honor function so prominently in his fiction and his obsession with the politically charged issue of the French occupation reveals him to be very receptive to the claims by the filmic propaganda that was attempted to be put into circulation at the time. The titles are the place that Bulcke must cling to in order to resolve this conflict between his emotional response as a film spectator and the demands placed on him as a representative figure by the other representatives of the state, but the pressure of these conflicting forces yields the strained legal formulation, with "serious reservations," of his desire to "prevent the elimination" of the inflammatory material coming from France and his wish for a more effective propaganda art that is "factual" in these matters.

In this conflict, Bulcke confirms the traumatic response to the presence of black troops in the occupation. Because World War I was in part guided by a colonialist sense of "expansionist motives and... notions of racial superiority, German society experienced this presence all the more acutely."<sup>144</sup> As Campt, Grosse, and Lemke-Muniz de Faria put it, the presence of black soldiers in the Rhineland and the Ruhrgebiet "intensified the trauma of defeat because they inverted the established colonial relationship of domination between 'whites and blacks' on German soil."<sup>145</sup> Indeed, Bulcke's obsessions echo the contemporary discourse that "stylized the

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a woman raped by black troops in the occupied territories." Cf. decision at

<http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/zengut/df2tb272z.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> Tina Campt, Pascal Grosse, and Yara-Colette Lemke-Muniz de Faria, "Blacks, Germans, and the Politics of Imperial Imagination, 1920 – 1960," in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, ed. Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 207.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

colonial troops as marauding hordes that raped women and desecrated German culture.”<sup>146</sup> In this process, the presence of black occupation troops metamorphosed into a febrile fantasy of a threat that endangered the foundations of German civilization as a means to displace the post-war social anxieties into a mythical “form of *Gegenwartsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the present),” as Campt, Grosse, and Lemke-Muniz de Faria put it.<sup>147</sup>

One of the significant fault lines where such acts of displacement can be measured are thus the censorship decisions on banning these films. While Bulcke is placed in the dilemma of reconciling the factual conditions of the occupation with his imaginary obsessions of violation, these demands are recorded in the linguistic strains of the formulation with which his decisions are argued. However, it would therefore be too facile to dismiss Bulcke as a mere stooge for the instruments of power who then allows the projections of the fantasies of a humiliated people to be circulated. He must refuse the circulation of the propaganda films. Bulcke’s burden ultimately points again to the power of the cinema as postulated by the Weimar constitution. In his position he endures a suffering where his experience of empathy as a film viewer renders him liable and the crisis of masculinity as an unstable identity and a powerless force that has so often been diagnosed in Weimar cinema<sup>148</sup> is experienced acutely by its first and foremost spectator, who is not Kracauer’s quotidian “shop girl” even if this imaginary spectator is postulated as female, but rather becomes Lang’s imaginary state attorney von Wenk.<sup>149</sup> If there are other narratives of

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 155.

<sup>149</sup> This extends the discussion of the public sphere defined by the cinema in interesting ways. As Miriam Hansen has demonstrated, the censorship interventions on the grounds of regulating “pleasure” found their moral equivalent

history to be developed here, they might no longer follow the well-worn paths that ultimately only succeed in outlining the banality of the bureaucrat but which might rather follow the trail of what happens to this figure when he begins to recognize himself and his plight on the screen. Then the narrative might return to another trajectory, namely the one in which the nameless bureaucrat for the state enacts the figurations of a film's ideal audience but who suffers silently in the screening chambers of the film examination agencies for all his imagined subjects in their stead. When this private sense of suffering is magnified into an expression on a grandiose public scale as the inevitable sacrificial fate of the one who serves as the representative for a people, we begin to approximate the affective powers of a Nazi film mobilized on behalf of audiences for such a film as *Ohm Krüger*.

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in the literary and intellectual discussions of the medium, so that, as she puts it, in “adapting patriarchal ideology to changes in sexual-social divisions of labour, the cinema was to become a crucial mediator between women’s experience and the dominant public sphere in the 1920s.” Cf. Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), p. 239.

### List of film censorship decisions cited

- Alarmtopf* (Emil Albes, D 1919/20).
- All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, USA 1930).
- Des Teufels Puppe* (Kurt Brenken, D 1919).
- Dr. Mabuse, Dr. Spieler* (Fritz Lang, D 1922).
- Der Frauenmarder* (D 1922).
- Gij zult niet dooden (War Sie Schuldig?* George André Beranger, NL 1922).
- Die Große Sensation* (Adolf Abter, D 1921).
- Großstadtmädels, Teil I* (Wolfgang Neff, 1920/21).
- Hunger in Deutschland* (D 1923).
- Das Judenmädels von Sosnowice* (Ferdinand Walden, D 1920).
- Kuhle Wampe* (Slatan Dudow, D 1932).
- Das Lebensroulette* (Siegfried Dessauer, D 1922).
- Ein Modernes Stadtparlament* (D 1922).
- Die Nacht im Grünen Affen* (D 1922).
- Die Nackten* (Martin Berger, D 1919).
- Oberst Rokschanin* (Otto Linnekogel, D 1922).
- Prästänkan (The Witch Woman,* Carl Theodor Dreyer, SE 1920).
- Der Roman eines Dienstmädchens* (Reinhold Schünzel, D 1921).
- Saal der Sieben Sünden,* (Arthur Wellin, D 1919).
- Die Schwarze Pest* (D 1921).
- Die Schwarze Schmach* (Carl Boese, D 1921).
- Sodom und Gomorrha* (Michael Kertesz, AT 1922).

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE BODY OF THE STATE: ON OHM KRÜGER BECOMING EMIL JANNINGS

In the discussion of films from the Nazi period much attention has been focused on the so-called *Staatsauftragsfilme*, films that were commissioned and supervised by the state, often under the direct auspices of the Minister for Propaganda and People's Enlightenment Joseph Goebbels. Indeed, these particular films have come to stand in for what might generally be regarded as Nazi Cinema. That is, these films have come to *represent* the use of the medium during the period of German fascism, whereas the remainder of the roughly one thousand films produced in the period of 1933 – 1945 is frequently dismissed as escapist entertainment. Recent works have begun to redress this blind spot (see, for example, Linda Schulte-Sasse, Eric Rentschler, and Sabine Hake) by refusing this dichotomy and looking more carefully at the cinematic means or contextual framework according to which we need to understand the cinema of the Third Reich.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Sabine Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

Despite such theoretical and conceptual advances, many studies into the cinema of fascism nonetheless seem to be drawn to what might be termed the blatantly obvious attempts of manipulation and aggressive foregrounding of politics in these films. In this respect, these films are appealing to scholars precisely because they can be clearly demarcated as “propaganda films” and, as such then, offer themselves up for inspection. They can stand in for what is already known and thus *represent* Nazi Cinema at its pinnacle of insidiousness. The very question of representation, then, is elided from the discussion, precisely because the mechanisms of representation seem so obvious as to merit no analysis.

By looking at one particular film, *Ohm Krüger*, this study, therefore, aims to investigate the question of how the problematics of representation are of crucial concern for this film and to what lengths it goes in order to control its mode of signification. In doing so, I want to investigate a mode of inscription employed in this film, which relies on the body as a textual marker for signification. In this respect, the inscription of the body of Emil Jannings into the cinematic text serves a dual function. First, it provides for an intertextual framework from his previous films that is reinscribed and reconfigured in *Ohm Krüger* and thus points to the need of reconceptualizing the means of signification in this film, while, secondly, it invokes a mode of encoding meaning within the body that demands an investigation into the very category of representation itself.

Here, it is useful to recall the work of Steven Shaviro, who posits the necessity to depart from the paradigm of *representation* that has structured the theorization of the cinematic apparatus, by turning our attention to the ways in which the cinema is “inescapably literal” in its materiality, so that “the figures that unroll before us cannot be regarded merely as arbitrary

representations or conventional signs.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this insistence of the primary centrality of the body here implies significant consequences for an overall understanding of the conjunction between the allegorical and material means by which film comes to signify. What follows, therefore, is an outline of how the category of representation needs to be articulated in its function as part of a larger system of meaning through which Nazi cinema must be understood.

At the time of its release in 1941, during the frenzy of the German Wehrmacht’s initial victories across Europe, *Ohm Krüger* immediately achieved broad public success and soon after received official recognition as a feature which merited a special rating of “politically and artistically especially valuable.” It was devised in a climate of wartime propaganda against “England,” as Great Britain was commonly called, and was “intended to prepare German audiences for the forthcoming invasion of Britain, which both Goebbels and the population as a whole believed was imminent.”<sup>3</sup> The film celebrates a revisionist historical account of the eponymous Boer president Paulus Kruger, nicknamed “Oom” for his alleged avuncular qualities,<sup>4</sup> who establishes a “Germanic” free nation in the face of British colonial subjugation. Thus, in this overall context, such a subject matter should come as no surprise. It seems, therefore, easy to determine that, as David Welch noted, “the purpose of the film... is to construct a series of principles that Goebbels could apply to the contemporary war in Europe...

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933 – 1945* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> Note: Orthography is a significant element in the film’s conception of the Boer nation as “German.” Therefore, I have decided to use the Germanized *Ohm Krüger* whenever this version is relevant to the character in the film and his imaginary functions in it, whereas I have opted in favor of using the original Afrikaans spelling of *Paulus Kruger* for the actual historical figure and his moniker *Oom* from the Afrikaans word for “uncle.”

by the contrasting use of archetype, in which simple black-and-white images of the enemy are manipulated to elicit the desired response from cinema audiences.”<sup>5</sup>

The conception of an easily “manipulated” audience is noteworthy, not just because it seems to dismiss the complexity of the problem of any empirical audience reception in general, but because it insists on a *transparency* by which the film signals its own intentions – to “elicit desired responses.” It is this apparent transparency that needs to be investigated first and foremost if we are to understand how such “simple images” are conjoined with a certain “desire” to mean or signify in general. In other words, *how* is meaning generated here in the first place? But even if we are to account for a more complicated relation between the audience and the film, or the text and its reception, there, too, we might establish a false dichotomy of determining what a text’s “intentions” are and then work to uncover the textual gaps and its ideological contradictions, perhaps even possibly to locate a spectatorial position that might offer a site of potential “resistance” or, conversely, an instance of submission to the desires, workings, and figurations of the text.

Klaus Kanzog has done invaluable work in collecting contextual and archival material in order to provide an overview of the majority of German films classified as “politically and artistically especially valuable”<sup>6</sup> and is careful to acknowledge the difficulty of quantifying audience responses. Recalling the screenings of these films in front of a variety of audiences at the Munich film museum in 1991 and 1992, he nonetheless states “everyone experienced his own affective responses [*Ergriffenheit*] and aggressions, but any personal discussions ... all led

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Klaus Kanzog, “*Staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll*”: Ein Handbuch zu 30 deutschen Filmen der Jahre 1934 bis 1945 (Munich: Diskurs-Film-Verlag, 1994).



to the central question of the effectiveness of the mechanisms of indoctrination in the mass medium film.”<sup>7</sup>

Even Kanzog, however, then shifts to an approach he characterizes as “rigorously object-specific and text-oriented.”<sup>8</sup> This approach allows him to categorize and quantify the ideologically desired effects the text has been determined to generate into what he terms “normative aspects” (*Normaspekte*). After an extensive plot summary of the film in question, Kanzog then enumerates these normative aspects in terms of their ideological purpose or, more specifically, in terms of their disciplinary value system to be imposed on the audiences of the film. For *Ohm Krüger*, for example, Kanzog lists four normative categories that are incorporated within the film: *state norm*, *economical norm*, *patriarchy*, and *military resistance* (*Wehrhaftigkeit*).<sup>9</sup> As much as Kanzog’s contributions are important as a scholarship of record, these norms nonetheless exhibit a curious problematic. On the one hand they are self-evident within the text, yet at the same time these norms need to be categorized and highlighted. Of course, given that a large number of these films are still not available for public exhibition in Germany, the necessity to include a diagrammatic schema of the ideological content of the films makes sense in this respect, but the problematic here points to a larger dilemma.

The films are obvious and self-evident in their meaning and yet this meaning needs to be rendered in a normative framework. In doing so, these films are both *normalized* in the sense that they are understood to conform to identifiable and determinable standards and *exceptionalized* in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 7. All translations, unless noted otherwise, are my own. The term *Ergriffenheit* is used in quotation marks in the original.

<sup>8</sup> “[S]treng objektbezogen und textorientiert” in the original. Kanzog, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 262 – 263.

the sense that their intended meaning needs to be prescribed and categorized. As if to amplify and solidify this double-bind, a recent publication on *Ohm Krüger* regrettably still imagines an audience that is incapable of understanding the complexity of textual operations by asserting that its purpose for the study of the film is “to shed light on how propaganda was often presented in the form of a feature film” and to conclude that this will help us study how the “political message” in these feature films is hidden so that “the propagandists could best realize their goal of molders of public opinion.”<sup>10</sup>

The ensuing discussion of the film then fantasizes an audience: it speaks to and for them by re-presenting to them the ways in which the film “does an excellent job” of presenting “a cordial bond between the president and his people”<sup>11</sup> and how it, therefore, “clearly reveals” its intentions to “spawn anti-British sentiment,”<sup>12</sup> all while accomplishing “its anti-British propaganda mission”<sup>13</sup> in general. All this achieves little apart from confirming Sabine Hake’s admonishment that “[t]he cinema of the Third Reich has never been exposed to the full range of critical perspectives available within film studies” and that, indeed, “many of the questions have not even been asked.”<sup>14</sup>

The following, then, is aimed at redirecting this kind of scholarship toward a more instructive understanding of how these films operate. In particular, it seems necessary to reexamine carefully the functions through which these films generate their meaning. This is all

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<sup>10</sup> Christian W. Hallstein, “*Ohm Krüger*: The Genesis of a Nazi Propaganda Film,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2002): 133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Sabine Hake, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich*, p. 2.

the more relevant since a careful analysis of what constitutes “propaganda” needs to avoid both trivializing and minimizing its own subject matter or the possible audience responses to it and demonizing and thereby mythologizing it into something that must by this virtue alone withstand meticulous scrutiny. In this respect, Marcia Landy has demonstrated the crucial importance of identifying how films employ specific and strategic conceptions of community, especially in regard to the past as “historical capital” that is “circulated in familiar and affective images” in order to generate a production of common sense;<sup>15</sup> that is, how films invest and are invested in “everyday, contradictory, coercive, and consensual strategies” which can provide us with an understanding of “the nature of both coercion and consensus.”<sup>16</sup>

Such an analysis will yield a more nuanced and complex insight into the mechanisms of how the cinema uses its images and thus can provide us with a larger sense of the importance of the cinema in general. More specifically, however, this kind of analysis will enable a perspective on the cinema of the Third Reich that understands the medium in its insidious intended and potential effects, but at the same time takes it seriously enough not to excoriate it into the “ultimate Other of world cinema,” as Sabine Hake has put it.<sup>17</sup> “What is needed” instead, she continues, “is a theory of popular cinema that neither dismisses the filmic imagination as a mere reflection of social reality nor denounces its wish formations as deceptive and false.”<sup>18</sup> How might such a theory work for a film like *Ohm Krüger*, which was both a state-commissioned film and an immensely popular film?

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<sup>15</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 229 – 230.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> Hake, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

While the credit sequence of *Ohm Krüger* bills Hans Steinhoff, the reliable filmmaker who was responsible for one of the first films of the Nazi movement, *Hitlerjunge Quex* (1933), as its director (*Regie*), the film is nonetheless an “Emil Jannings Film.” Steinhoff’s contribution is credited as mere “direction” (*Spielleitung*), whereas Jannings’ role is emphasized by the final credit title as “overall control Emil Jannings” (*Gesamtleitung*). The complex and complicated figure of Emil Jannings is crucial to the film, both for the filmic event itself as well as the context within which *Ohm Krüger* was produced and released. The following will attempt to situate the markers that make Jannings’ role, in all senses of the word, relevant to the overall understanding of the film.

The project of *Ohm Krüger* was initiated in close collaboration between Jannings and Joseph Goebbels. Already in November 1939 Goebbels notes in his diary that “Jannings is developing new material for films for me. A very good *Ohm Krüger* about the Boer War.”<sup>19</sup> Goebbels’ involvement in the development of the film, while certainly not unprecedented,<sup>20</sup> took on a more significant aspect since it was the first film to be designated with the certificate “Film of the Nation” (*Prädikat “Film der Nation”*), established April 2, 1941, on the day *Ohm Krüger* passed censorship inspections and two days before its Berlin premiere in the Ufa-Palast am Zoo.<sup>21</sup> Only four subsequent films were awarded this certificate.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, so heaped with official

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Klaus Kanzog, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> Since 1933 the Ministry for People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda had already commissioned 41 films as a *Staatsauftragsfilm*, a film specifically ordered by the state. Cf. David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933 - 1945*, p. 271.

<sup>21</sup> Kanzog, pp. 253 – 254.

<sup>22</sup> *Heimkehr* (1941, Gustav Ucicky), *Der Große König* (1942, Veit Harlan), *Andreas Schlüter* (1942, Herbert Maisch), and *Kolberg* (1945, Veit Harlan).

praise was this film, and especially Jannings' contributions to it, that Goebbels awarded Jannings the "Ring of Honor of the German Cinema" for his performance and Jannings became one of the few actors to be included in the official category of *Staatsschauspieler*.<sup>23</sup>

In conjunction with the film's premiere and in the weeks and months leading up to it, numerous articles were launched in the press that provided information about the historical context of the Boer War with titles such as "That was England – That is England: Murder behind Barbed Wire. Devastating Scenes from the new Jannings-Film," "Ohm Krüger: Hero and Father of his People," and "The Revolt of the Boer People against England's Rapacity and Arbitrary Rule."<sup>24</sup> Jannings himself contributed an article in the *Filmwelt* magazine under the title "Ohm Krüger: Fighting Foremost against England's Arbitrary Rule."<sup>25</sup> Finally, Kruger's memoirs were republished in Germany at around the same time as the release of the film and included an introduction by Jannings.<sup>26</sup> In the introduction Jannings enthused about what it means for an actor to embody the individual so that the contemporary age understands "the meaning of the past."<sup>27</sup> This task, Janning pronounces in a fascist rhetoric fond of substantival constructions, is the following: "Representation of man means giving significance to the unique and to the historical in the fateful and eternal."<sup>28</sup> For the actor this means to encapsulate in the individual

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<sup>23</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> Listed in Kanzog, "Staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll," p. 264.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Hallstein, "Ohm Krüger," p. 138. Hallstein makes particular note of the introduction by Emil Jannings.

<sup>27</sup> Emil Jannings, "Paul Krüger," in Ohm Krüger (i.e. Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger), *Die Lebenserinnerungen des Buren-Präsidenten* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag, 1941), p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. In the original: "Menschendarstellung heißt Sinngebung des Einmaligen und des Geschichtlichen im Schicksalhaften und Ewigen."

fate all that comprises “the inevitable and the laws of the regular.”<sup>29</sup> Noting the essential affinity between the German people and Paul Krüger’s forefathers,<sup>30</sup> Jannings declares that in “his most difficult hour, Paul Krüger straightened himself up into the idea that no individual and no people can escape the destiny of sacrificing themselves for the sake of the future.”<sup>31</sup>

To coincide with this massive media campaign surrounding the premiere of *Ohm Krüger*, the prolific and respected film and theater critic Herbert Ihering, who had been an influential voice in the Weimar theater circles and who had served as a protégé of the young Bertolt Brecht, published a hagiographic book on Jannings and his career, replete with a celebratory introduction to the man Jannings and illustrated with lavish production still photographs and private shots.<sup>32</sup> While not mentioning the production of *Ohm Krüger*, the book includes a sequence of 75 full-page photographs of Jannings, beginning with an image of Jannings and Goebbels in active conversation as they are walking along the Wolfgang Lake in Austria, the site of Jannings’ country home, and culminating with four images, the juxtaposition of which places Jannings squarely at the intersection of history, power, and the cinema: after a number of still photographs

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Original: “Der Schauspieler... muß dahin streben, im Schicksal dieses Einzelnen das Unabwendbare und Gesetzmäßige ... zu erfassen.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 12 – 13. A footnote in this regard assures readers of the accuracy of this statement by noting, without further proof, that “the President confirms that his ancestors came from Germany, but his family does not know from which city. He only knows that the forefather of the African branch of his family was married to a French woman and that he had to flee for his beliefs.” This, apparently, is sufficient for a “German essence” in character.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. In the German original, Jannings’ use of the neologist verb *emporreißen* (literally “to tear oneself up into”) is equally awkward in tone: “In der schwersten Stunde seines Lebens hat sich Paul Krüger emporgerissen zu der Idee, daß sich kein einzelner und kein Volk der Bestimmung, sich für die Zukunft opfern zu müssen, entziehen kann.”

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Ihering, *Emil Jannings: Baumeister seines Lebens und seiner Filme* (Heidelberg: Verlagsanstalt Hüthig & Co, 1941).

from his roles, a photo shows Jannings as he accepts the *Staatspreis* given to him by Adolf Hitler, followed by a private photograph of the actor standing on a street in “the liberated city of Danzig” in October 1939. The book then concludes with two production still portraits with Jannings rendered as Ohm Krüger.<sup>33</sup>

In the selfsame manner, Ihering’s text also situates Jannings within this configuration as a straightforward narrative of how Jannings has come to epitomize a particular kind of “hard actor species which gained strength through infinite adversity.”<sup>34</sup> In this narrative, Jannings becomes “the architect of his life and of his films” as the book’s subtitle declares. Apparently, Ihering bases much of the writing on material from Jannings’ own autobiographical writing, which Jannings wrote to coincide with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his work on the screen in 1939.<sup>35</sup> This material, then, gets worked into a narrative which proclaims Jannings’ roles to be the “organic”

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Illustrations following p. 59.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Written as *Lebenserinnerungen* in 1939. Cf. the posthumously published autobiography Emil Jannings, *Theater, Film – Das Leben und ich*, ed. C.G. Bergius (Berchtesgaden: Verlag Zimmer & Herzog, 1951). In a preface to the 1951 edition, the publishers claim that in 1939 Jannings refused to allow the typescript to go to print after he had received the galley proofs from his then publisher and noticed passages that had been excised, people who had been omitted, and found insertions that were “diametrically opposed to what he himself had written.” (p. 3) This seems interesting, given the congruence of anecdotes and descriptions between Ihering and Jannings’ autobiography *passim*. Moreover, similar congruences inform two other works on Jannings published during his lifetime, neither of which are referenced in Ihering. One is *1000% Jannings [sic]* by Munkepunke (i.e. Alfred Richard Meyer), (Hamburg – Berlin: Prismen-Verlag, 1930), and Richard Bie (i.e. Richard Biedrzyński), *Emil Jannings: Eine Diagnose des deutschen Films* (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1936). See the discussion of these books below.

outgrowth of “intuition and sentiment,”<sup>36</sup> culminating in his artistic calling toward a new challenge. This challenge was to be found in a new definition of film:

“As a true popular art, accessible to the millions, effecting on the millions, film was not only required to maintain its significance, but to expand it. Film was given another, dual function. It was to serve the people in their desire for cheerfulness, entertainment and exciting human picture stories. It was to be simple, commonly understood, clear and in its basic attitude decent and healthy. At the same time, however, it was to represent the state itself, its moving forces, its ideas, its educational passion. Film should represent the people, the way it is and they way it should be.”<sup>37</sup>

What is remarkable about this description, apart from its attempt to reproduce the discursive tenor of the rhetoric of National Socialism,<sup>38</sup> is how it incorporates into the medium film physical human attributes (“healthy”) and states of mind, while simultaneously determining it as the material manifestation of a state that in its embodiment as film exhibits human characteristics such as desire, passion, and determination. In other words, film represents the embodiment of the state inasmuch as the state is the abstract representation of the people. Ihering continues by pronouncing the first film that articulates this manifestation of the state as the people to be Hans Steinhoff’s *Der alte und der junge König* (1935), starring Emil Jannings as the aging Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I., because in this dramatic film Jannings realizes “the

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<sup>36</sup> Ihering, *Emil Jannings*, p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> For important analyses of the language and discourse of Naziism, see Victor Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1985), and Sternberger/Storz/Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen* (Hamburg: Claasen Verlag, 1957).



popular and the emblematic at the same time.”<sup>39</sup> In his insistence on the convergence between “that of the people,” *das Volkstümliche*, which as a concept indicates an abstraction but nonetheless implies a sense of specificity of being grounded in the popular, and the emblematic, *das Sinnbildliche*, as a symbolic abstraction in opposition to the concreteness of the popular, Ihering then comes to the figure of Jannings as he who personifies both – the abstract and the concrete – within his role as a star.

Ihering calls Jannings a “star” because, in contrast to films which merely highlight their famous actors, he is involved in the construction of the film in its “totality”: a Jannings film is a “star-film,” in which “the star is its leader in the spiritual sense.”<sup>40</sup> Jannings, thus, is the “guiding light” of the film overall. As such, he becomes the “organic” principle around which all of his films are organized and which gives his life as an actor a trajectory that turns him into the figure that “has carried the German film on his shoulders.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Jannings comes to embody every aspect of his being and his art: “Life and work, being and art correspond with one another,” Ihering writes and continues, “there was no break between the public and the private sphere” for Jannings, and “thus he remained who he was and became what he is: an artist of being and of representation, one who becomes and one who persists.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ihering, *Emil Jannings*, p. 45: in the original “Er [Jannings] sah zugleich das Volkstümliche und das Sinnbildliche in diesem Drama.”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46. Cf. the original: “Es gibt aber auch einen anderen Starfilm. Einen Starfilm, in dem der Star führend im geistigen Sinne ist.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: “Leben und Arbeit, Dasein und Kunst entsprechen sich. Es gab keinen Bruch zwischen der privaten und öffentlichen Sphäre. So blieb Jannings, der er war, und wurde, was er ist: ein Künstler des Daseins und des Darstellens, ein Werdender und Beharrender.”

While this descriptive style again follows the rhetoric of a paradoxical apposition, Ihering identifies a convergence here which places Jannings on the cusp between the star's two functions as the "embodiments of *ideal* ways of behaving" and the "embodiments of *typical* ways of behaving," as Richard Dyer classifies the star image in transition "from gods to mortals."<sup>43</sup> This paradigmatic transition from "gods to identification figures" Dyer locates, following Edgar Morin, in the "'embourgeoisement' of the medium" around 1930 with the advent of sound.<sup>44</sup> Over and against this transition, however, Jannings himself maintains that he belongs to an earlier sphere of acting, one where the anarchic idealism and intuitive passion of actors have not yet been supplanted by a new form of orderly structure. Indeed, Jannings writes in his autobiography:

"Today all of this [the life of an actor] has changed significantly. Social progress has not stopped at the theater as well and now actors are placed into well-regulated contractual obligations. I would be the last to mistake the benefits of social progress, but no one will misunderstand me if I say: the actor has been *bourgeoisified* [ist *verbürgerlicht*]!"<sup>45</sup>

Of course, this statement echoes the mistrust and contempt that Nazi discourse exhibited for the German, if not European, *Bürgertum*, and may very well raise suspicions that, editors' claims to the contrary, Jannings autobiography was written in full sympathy with the prevailing

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Emil Jannings, *Theater – Film, das Leben und ich*, p. 56 (emphasis in original).

political discourse of the time.<sup>46</sup> What is noteworthy here, however, is how Jannings' own insistence on his placement within an older generation of stars corresponds to the overall narrative of his autobiography. In it Jannings goes to great lengths to move against the potentially polysemous tendencies of his own star image and states that "I realized that from the moment that I looked back on my life, all the colorful singularities flowed together into an astonishingly organic whole... as if a strong and determined will had sketched out all my steps."<sup>47</sup>

Confirming this notion of the actor's figure as a fusion of essence and type, Richard Bie offers a "diagnosis" of how Jannings' image fits into the larger state of the art. His *Emil Jannings: Eine Diagnose des deutschen Films* was published in a series entitled "German Subjectivity" (*die deutsche Innerlichkeit*) and dedicated to "reporting on the essence and singularity of those Germans who have mentally guided their fatherland after the war and represent an example and yardstick of a new department for the German people."<sup>48</sup> In it, Bie declares that Jannings' roles can be attributed to his "descent from generations in his family of a nether German breed" which is embodied in Jannings' roles of "great historical personalities."<sup>49</sup> Thus, Bie deduces, do we see in Jannings the "unity of the figure" (*Einheit der Gestalt*), with

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<sup>46</sup> A notion that would be confirmed by the fact that Jannings was one of the Nazi film industry's most reliable and celebrated star, whose presence in the highest political circles was taken for granted. See footnote 35 for the claims made by the editors of Jannings' autobiography.

<sup>47</sup> Jannings, pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Bie, *Emil Jannings*, frontispiece.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

whom “is commenced a new world of filmic reality in which mask and face can no longer be differentiated.”<sup>50</sup>

Rather than dismiss these kinds of celebration of the star persona as merely contextual material, especially in a case such as Richard Bie, whose blatantly hyperbolic and breathless summoning of Jannings into the service of Nazi ideology might compel us to disassociate Jannings the actor from his roles as they are portrayed in the literature of his time, we need to place this material within a larger framework of a problematics of how meaning is generated. In other words, Bie’s and Ihering’s efforts must be regarded in their attempts to delineate and mark the meaning of Jannings as a figure in his films and as a figuration in which the distinction between such categories as the mask and the face no longer apply. The insistence, then, on a coherence between mask and face and the remarkable rhetoric that is generated towards the establishment of a seamless “fit” between actor and role relies on a specific conceptualization of the body.

Moreover, this insistence indicates a concern with regulating meaning outside the audience’s experience of a specific film and it is on this level that studies on the mechanisms of propaganda have proven to be the most useful because at the heart of the question of how to determine the functions and mechanisms of propaganda lies the issue of how these “propaganda films” channel and regulate meaning. For the character that Jannings is said to embody, then, these secondary or extratextual efforts to augment Jannings’ films indicate the degree to which such sources interfere in the construction of meaning and thus point to the larger issue of how to demarcate the interpretive framework that needs to be brought to bear on the “readings” of his

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

films.<sup>51</sup> I will return to the question of the textual frame, but for now it is worth noting how much emphasis is placed on Jannings' embodiment of his characters and how much effort is imposed upon the creation of a similarity between person and persona.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> It might be worthwhile to point out that Carl Zuckmayer in his descriptions of German cultural leaders gave a very detailed and illustrative account of the figure of Emil Jannings. Carl Zuckmayer's characterization of Jannings in his "secret reports," intelligence briefings which he wrote in 1943 and 1944 on behalf of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA, have recently been discovered and published. Zuckmayer skillfully sketches out the characters and personalities of 150 authors, publishers, actors, directors, and musicians who were prominent in German cultural life. On Jannings, an "Überfalstaff" in his words, Zuckmayer writes: "I love this old sow... In his appearance, too, he carries somewhat of a lard-faced hog's head on his mighty shoulders, which, however, also conveys the squinty shrewdness, the quiet sneakiness and the clumsy charme of a Bern bear... Even though he is an actor, he is a unique figure, designed by Rabelais, carried out by Balzac, drawn by Daumier and painted by Breughel, ridiculed by Molière, caricatured by George Grosz. This does not so much relate to his merits as an actor, which are very significant, but to his human, or rather, his creaturely appearance. Whether he is indeed a human being, I could not say for sure – but certainly he is one of the most amusing creations in God's bestiaire and zoo. His offensive linguistic imagination (in Emil's mouth the most vulgar gutterspeak achieves a profundity of Lutherean proportions), his omnivorous appetite for all matters of the flesh and of pleasure, and even his cunning, fox-like sentimentality (crying for the little hare while devouring it) – all of this has class, and the appeal of singularity. 'This guy is one of a kind, he will never come back,' such a couplet should be intoned by a choir of liveried supernumeraries and Cancan dancers with flying skirts on his grave." Cf. Carl Zuckmayer, *Geheimreport*. Zuckmayer-Schriften, ed. Gunther Nickel and Johanna Schrön (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2002), pp. 136 – 138. (Translation mine).

<sup>52</sup> Another trajectory that needs to be followed here is the remarkable congruence between the various works surrounding Jannings (see also footnote 35). Despite the autobiography's unpublished status, most works on Jannings return to the same anecdotes and stories, as if based on a concentrated effort to streamline the interpretation of his figure. A text that notably differs from these accounts is Jean Mitry's 1928 monograph on Jannings. While some of Mitry's claims are evidently erroneous (he states, for example, that Jannings was born in Brooklyn), they

This concern for fusion of character and role is expressed on a different register as well for the release of *Ohm Krüger*. In a special event, a 60-page booklet for the film was printed and a number of entries of illustrations in the satirical journal *Simplicissimus* were dedicated to the Boer War and the film,<sup>53</sup> on its cover a caricature of “Ohm Jannings,” who muses, “if I did not know I was Ohm Krüger, I would imagine I was Emil Jannings.”<sup>54</sup> Almost all of the reviews of the premiere listed the film as an Emil-Jannings-Film. Jannings *was* Ohm Krüger. What does such an insistence on the correspondence between the actor and his character, between his figure and his persona imply here? How does the fusion of Jannings into the figure of Ohm Krüger predicate the political significance of the film? What does this indicate for a larger discussion of the way in which this film reconfigures its attempts at signification?

In order to address this remarkable obsession with embodiment, personification, and incorporation as a particularly noteworthy instance for the star image of Emil Jannings, we need to look at how his body and acting style have been configured throughout his film career. Beginning with smaller roles in 1914 Jannings achieved star status with his first major successes in Ernst Lubitsch’s *Madame DuBarry* (1919, English title *Passion*) and *Anna Boleyn* (1920, English title *Deception*), and Dimitri Buchowetzky’s *Danton* (1921). In all three films Jannings plays a leader with a monumental corporeal presence in opposition to a figure of abstraction that is codified as a different conception of the state as the law. In *Deception* Jannings embodies King

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seem to follow a different “legend,” that is, they circulate “unauthorized” rumors and anecdotes about Jannings. Cf. Jean Mitry, *Émil Jannings: Ses Débuts, Ses Films, Ses Aventures* (Paris: Les Publications Jean-Pascal, 1928).

<sup>53</sup> David Welch asserts that the entire edition of the journal is dedicated to the film, whereas, there are, indeed, four illustrations with direct references to the film in the issue. Cf. *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, p. 234. (The journal is listed here as *Simplizissimus* spelled with a “z”.)

<sup>54</sup> “Ohm Jannings” drawing by Olaf Gulbransson on the cover of *Simplicissimus*, March 19, 1941, vol. 46, no. 12.

Henry VIII and he inhabits “the body of the king,” to such a degree that he, “with his enormous proportions, controls every setting and every moment.”<sup>55</sup> The corpulent figure of Jannings, moreover, stands in relation to another figure, that of the state as abstracted force. This process of figuration underscores the importance of the dichotomy between body and mind because all of these films position Jannings *against* a figure of writing and bureaucracy in their imagination of divergent manifestations of state power and leadership.

Jannings’ King Louis XV in *Passion* is an amorous, petulant, and easily distracted king, whose primary goal is to consummate his relationship with the enchanting courtesan Madame Dubarry, while his minister Lebel attempts to steer the king towards his responsibilities as a ruler. Commenting on the representation of power in this film Marc Silberman has pointed out how the film complicates a logic of patriarchy: while Madame Dubarry “enters a hierarchical social organization as object, exchanged and used by men as a kind of currency,” she nonetheless is able to disrupt this process of commodification by virtue of “the play of appearance” and thus her ability to “negotiate the social organization as subject because it confuses the very absoluteness of the distinction between subject and object.”<sup>56</sup> The effect of this shift in power relations, therefore, positions the King in a precarious conflict with his status as the embodiment of power.

According to Silberman, the film’s political framework becomes a “conflict” between the “scandalous power of female artifice and the representatives of the social order who fall prey to

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<sup>55</sup> Sabine Hake, “Lubitsch’s Period Films as Palimpsest: On *Passion* and *Deception*,” in *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television*, ed. Bruce A. Murray and Christopher J. Wickham (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp 88 - 89.

<sup>56</sup> Marc Silberman, “Imagining History: Weimar Images of the French Revolution,” in *Framing the Past*, ed. Bruce A. Murray and Christopher J. Wickham, p. 105.

its seduction.”<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, Silberman locates the source of this conflict in the instability that erotic desire introduces in the structures of power. What the film manages to construct is a king, who as a representative of patriarchy, is nevertheless not in control of the gaze. It is Dubarry who commandeers the eyes of the King and, in fact, the film introduces us to Louis XV as he spots Madame Dubarry. Her appearance causes his leering vision to neglect all other duties. In contrast to the desiring King stands Armand, Dubarry’s former lover, who rejects his own desire for her to become the leader of the masses. As Silberman states, “his repression of desire and rejection of sexuality allows him to identify fully with the bourgeois revolution.”<sup>58</sup>

What Lubitsch’s film stages, then, is a competing vision of power in relation to the body. The ailing King in his deathbed, a tormented body stricken by smallpox, cries out for Dubarry’s creature comforts, but his political power wanes with the demise of his physical power. The film concludes with the masses who demand the sacrifice of the body. Madame Dubarry is led onto the scaffold and beheaded. Thus the bourgeois revolution begins to exorcise the body as the representation of power and institutes a new concept of the masses. This conceptualization of the masses, however, hinges on a paradox. As Sabine Hake has shown, the uses of French and English history as a subject matter in the Lubitsch films must be understood as a preoccupation with the “idea of nationalism,” and, by extension, the concerns of the “cultural sphere,” which generated “so many different configurations that the boundaries between text and context almost disappeared.”<sup>59</sup> This dissolution, she demonstrates, results in the films’ propensity for inviting a reactionary interpretation in the relation of the individual body to the masses, an interpretation

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Hake, pp. 79 – 80.



which would be generated through the tension produced by the films' sentiments of regression over and against historical fact.

Therefore, in order to generate this mode of interpretation, the film posits an "extreme accessibility to ideological inscriptions that makes their blatant misrepresentation of historical fact not a shortcoming but a great advantage in an unscrupulous attack on the historical imagination."<sup>60</sup> It is this means of "inscription" that needs to be foregrounded in an understanding of how Lubitsch's films generate their meaning. What this points to is a different category of meaning production that cannot be reduced to a text-immanent model or relegated to an audience-based reception category. As Hake shows, the films offer their horizons of interpretations and provide an intersecting "access to conflicting inscriptions and meanings and must therefore be thought of as a site of production rather than a mere product of dominant culture or conservative ideology."<sup>61</sup>

If we consider the corporeal figure of Jannings as one important instance at which these inscriptions of conflicting modes of thought manifest themselves, then we must take into consideration how his body functions as meaning here. Inasmuch as Jannings is the embodiment of power, he also expresses the limit of power as physical lust. Even more dramatically than *Madame Dubarry*, Dimitri Buchowetzki's *Danton* (1921) stages the French Revolution as the fulfillment of physical pleasure and carnal desires. The first deed of Jannings' Danton is to "seize an aristocratic girl" in order to vindicate the *droit de seigneur* for the masses. The revolutionary notion of class, here articulated as a desire according to which Jannings is the representative of the masses and therefore fulfills its desires by proxy to enjoy life's pleasures, comes into conflict

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

with the Robespierre as the representative of the state in its abstraction. In this conflict the dichotomy between the mind and the body becomes the primary locus for competing articulations of power.

The difference in type between the stiff Robespierre (Werner Krauss) and frivolous Danton is epitomized in a sequence where Robespierre consolidates his power in the Reign of Terror. In his function as the ultimate bureaucrat who signs the arrest warrants and thus controls the force of the reign of terror, Robespierre gives his signature to the arrest of Danton because “the Republic demands it.” In this scene Robespierre wears a dark costume with a large white collar that in its rigidity resembles a Calvinist necklace. He is rendered as a pure head, no longer attached to any body. His signature inscribes terror, but he has already become a figure of abstraction because the hand is writing the words of judgment and his head is without a body. Separated at the neck from the rest of his body, Robespierre is the literalization of the Revolution in its final consequence. He is already guillotined and, because of this, his head is “incorporating” a power run rampant with *La Terreur*. Yet this literalization, the “head” of the Committee of Public Safety who will become the most powerful man in the Republic, is at the same time an abstraction, because his power rests on the state to be as a force of “writing.” Hence his head is the Republic in its entelechy and final fulfillment, whereas Danton remains the representative body of the masses.

These competing views of power need to be resolved through a recourse to the concept of law. This means that in the final tribunal the conflict is played out as the body of the masses versus the court of the law to be written. This law sees its power fulfilled by the act of summoning the individual citizen. The act of the citizen speaking his name to be recorded in the books of the court marks his acceptance of the system of power. The court, therefore, demands

the name and address of the accused for the record: “your name, citizen?” says the judge to one of Danton’s fellow accused, Herault-Séchelles. In response he spits and demands “wash your hands before you write my name!” When Danton is ordered to state his name for the record he laughs and the masses surrounding him laugh with him. After he tells them to quiet down, Danton mocks the tribunal by stating “my name? Soon in the pantheon of history! My address? Soon nowhere!” When the court declares in reply that the “citizen Danton” is accused of being an “enemy of the Revolution and of the people,” Jannings heaves his chest with contumacy and turns to the masses behind him. “The ‘people’?” he yells and insists that they will decide on the final judgment, whereupon the masses flood down from the balcony and jump on the tribunal’s desks.

What is being orchestrated here is a sophisticated battle between the masses as a positive bodily force, as incorporated by their representative Jannings, and the arbitrary and destructive rule of law, as exemplified by the destructive rampages of Robespierre, structured around the question in whose name justice will be delivered. We could consider this the moment of culmination for a filmic analysis of the historical film in Weimar Germany by determining that this battle coincides with the reactionary fantasies that the cinema gives rise to. After all, the masses here are easily swayed and hence the “masses are as despicable as their leaders,” as Siegfried Kracauer declares this film’s implications.<sup>62</sup>

But, as Kracauer also indicates, there is an excessive tension in the manner in which the masses are mobilized here. Indeed, Kracauer admonishes, the spectacle of the masses was not confined to the screen but rather an “element” of “German everyday life – a process that reached

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<sup>62</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 51.

its climax after the war, when no one could avoid encountering them on streets and squares.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, Kracauer continues, “[t]hese masses were more than a weighty social factor; they were as tangible as any individual.”<sup>64</sup> For Kracauer, the cinema of the time, and especially Lubitsch’s films in this respect, attempted to negotiate the position of the individual in relation to the masses with the result that mass scenes “decomposed the crowd” to leave the individual figure “as a forlorn creature in a world threatened by mass domination.”<sup>65</sup> We can therefore speak of a tension that these films generate between the individual and the mass. However, what Kracauer does not take into account here, is the question of representation if the masses are represented by the figure of Jannings.

This brings us to the question of how his cinematic body relates to the concept of masses. In *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze considers the emergence of the “‘classical’ intellectual cinema” of Sergei Eisenstein, for example, and identifies it as a cerebral cinema “which brought together pathos and the organic.”<sup>66</sup> In this linkage Deleuze traces two axes, the “axis of the law of the concept” and “the axis of the law of the image,” both of which, in conjunction, work together to produce “the ideal of knowledge as harmonious totality, which sustains this classical representation.”<sup>67</sup> While it would be difficult to equate the films of Ernst Lubitsch with the cinema of Eisenstein, it is nonetheless instructive to consider them as “intellectual” cinema in the way that Deleuze understands it. In particular the importance rests here in the model of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>66</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 210.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

“representation” as developed by the two axes. Deleuze defines the “law of the concept” as a principle of movement which is constituted “as continually integrating itself into a whole whose change it expresses, and as continually differentiating itself in accordance with the objects between which it is established.”<sup>68</sup> In turn, this movement encounters the “law of the image” where “similarity and contiguity determine the way in which we pass from one image to another” until both axes converge “in order to achieve the identity of image and concept.”<sup>69</sup>

Deleuze explicitly remarks on the connection between this mode of signification to that of semiology which, via linguistics, “maintained the classic cerebral model, both from the point of view of metaphor – metonymy (similarity – contiguity) and from the point of view of the syntagm and paradigm (integration – differentiation).”<sup>70</sup> And, indeed, Jannings’ proximity to the masses in *Danton*, in stark contrast to Robespierre’s detached paradigm of power, determines his metonymic quality to stand in for the desires of the individual by virtue of the congruence of his desires with that of the individual within the masses. The figure of Jannings thus incorporates two modes of signification within the same tension that Carlo Ginzburg terms the “oscillation between representation as a substitute and as mimetic evocation.”<sup>71</sup>

As an embodiment of power, Jannings’ body doubles its mode of signification that is analogous to a mode of representation which, according to Ginzburg, originates in the 13<sup>th</sup> century: he is both the “effigy” of the ruler, that is, his body substitutes for a dead ruler and thus stands in for the “eternal body of the king inasmuch as he was associated with a public

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>71</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Representation: The Word, The Idea, The Thing” in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 63 – 64.

institution,” while his “corpse was his ephemeral body inasmuch as he was an individual.”<sup>72</sup> This tension would also allow for an explanation of why the Lubitsch films demand a recourse to a historical subject matter, since, in order to generate an effigy of the ruler, he has to be dead already. Moreover, the oscillation between the actual body of the “king” as the rightful ruler and his contiguity with the masses confirms Deleuze’s insistence that in the classical cinema, as opposed to the modern cinema, the masses are still there. “For in the classical cinema,” Deleuze writes, “the people are there, even though they are oppressed, tricked, subject, even though blind or unconscious.”<sup>73</sup> However, Deleuze notes, the ideal of the cinema as a democratic art is compromised by “the rise of Hitler, which gave cinema as its object not the masses become subject but the masses subjected.”<sup>74</sup> In this process of subjectivization, which recalls the conflict of Danton’s refusal to speak his name as a citizen to be recorded, the screen is left devoid of the people as a group or a force.

It is crucial that Deleuze at this point turns to the cinema of the third world because it is there that the filmmaker must deal most conspicuously with “the elements of a people who are still missing.”<sup>75</sup> In addition, Deleuze returns here to Félix Guattari and his idea of a “minor literature” by connecting the “minority film-maker” to the “impasse described by Kafka: the impossibility of not ‘writing’, the impossibility of writing in the dominant language, the impossibility of writing differently, ... and it is through this state of crisis that he has to pass, it is

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>73</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 216.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

this that has to be resolved.”<sup>76</sup> As a critical evolutionary development for Deleuze this crisis can even be marked in classical cinema by maintaining a “boundary which marked the correlation of the political and the private, and which allowed, through the intermediary of an awareness, passage from one social force to another.”<sup>77</sup>

More importantly, however, this crisis can serve “to constitute an assemblage... as the prefiguration of the people who are missing.”<sup>78</sup> In doing so, the progressive third world filmmaker is able to produce, “not the myth of a past people, but the storytelling of the people to come” by articulating “a foreign language in a dominant language, precisely in order to express an impossibility of living under domination.”<sup>79</sup> Fredric Jameson has linked this impasse in representability to the reëmergence of allegory, which, as he claims, “fatally stages its historic reappearance in the postmodern era” on a global scale.<sup>80</sup> This statement must be examined in light of *Ohm Krüger* because of the film’s allegorization of Emil Jannings and its movement of imagining the *telos* of the history of the German people as a colonized subject on a monumental scale.

In other words, what happens when the problem of the myth of a people yet to come is allegorized through the figure of Jannings in Nazi cinema? Marcia Landy has demonstrated how

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: For a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>77</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 218.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>80</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 4 – 5. On “allegory” cf. especially Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

the uses of history in Nazi cinema are designed to create a “form of knowledge” that, “associated with the ‘mute’ language of melodrama, is commonsensical experience buttressed by folklore that passes as official history.”<sup>81</sup> What Landy emphasizes, furthermore, is the way in which Nazi cinema creates metaleptic explanations of historical narratives, all while mobilizing and inverting “tradition and modernity, science and folklore, promiscuity and conjugal rectitude, same-sex desire and heterosexuality” into “fluid categories.”<sup>82</sup> It is this emphasis on the fluidity, reversibility and mobilization of binary categories in the service of generating a normativity that understands itself primarily through the ultimate dichotomy of “the ‘elect’ and the ‘dammed,’” as Landy puts it,<sup>83</sup> that needs to be analyzed here.

If the “organic” development of Jannings into the figure of the leader begins with his incorporation of a dual understanding of the leader in Lubitsch’s films, his subsequent films will frequently emphasize the question of power as configured through the concept of authority. Nonetheless, this evocation of power in relation to authority remains grounded in a cinematic understanding of the body. In this respect the body of Jannings remains “excessive” within his films, not merely because of a larger-than-life presence, but also because he signifies beyond the textual framework of a particular filmic narrative. This extratextual dimension of signification forces us to consider the boundaries or framework within which meaning is determined in his films. Jannings himself was fond of this notion of an extraterritorial area, which he would have

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<sup>81</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p. 241.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*



called a “romanticism” that is “not of this world.”<sup>84</sup> Jannings celebrated this “romanticism of the underworld”<sup>85</sup> because it gave rise to the counter-narratives of quotidian life.

In the silent horror film *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*, Paul Leni, 1924) the issue of boundaries is integrated into the narrative of the film, which depicts three discrete stories as they are conjured up by a young man who is employed in the “panopticon” display of waxworks at a carnival. His duty is to “write startling tales about these figures” and the first and most elaborate story he concocts concerns the figure of the Caliph of Baghdad, Harun al-Rashid (Emil Jannings). Since the wax figure has lost its arm, the “narrator” of the film, who is here rendered as the writer of stories, proceeds to write down the story of how the Caliph “lost his arm.” Beginning by writing down the name, we see how the writer enunciates this figure on the page as “the most romantic and mischief-loving ruler of the age” who, “above all, hated monotony.” The figures turn into characters as we are transported across the boundaries of fiction and time, and Harun al-Rashid is revealed to be a voluminous and voluptuous entity, which, by evoking once more the notion of dissolving boundaries, merges with the billowing pillows on which he is seated.

When the Caliph becomes bored he summons his Vizier, an enunciatory act which is rendered as a written caption of “Wesier!” that emerges from a medium close-up of Jannings’ face.<sup>86</sup> The two then begin a scheme to seduce Zarah, the beautiful wife of Assad the Baker,

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<sup>84</sup> Emil Jannings, “Romanticizing the Criminal in Film,” (1929) reprinted in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimendberg, eds., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 629.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> In the English-language version of the film this moment is “translated” by the insertion of a still photograph of Jannings from which the moving caption “Vizier!” emanates.

which threatens to unravel when the suspicious Assad enters the palace bedroom and sneaks upon the sleeping Caliph in order to hack off his arm. At the same time, however, the Caliph is seen charming Zarah. The solution to this temporal and spatial incongruity is revealed when Assad, hunted by the palace guards, returns to his house and Zarah has to conceal the enormous Caliph in the oven, which is the only place big enough to provide a hiding-place. Zarah stops the approaching guards by summoning the body of the “murdered” Caliph who emerges petulantly from the oven. We find out that the Caliph is able to pursue his nocturnal passions by leaving a wax effigy of himself in the palace bed and it is this one-armed effigy that remains in the panopticon.

Such antics might certainly confirm the permeability of narrative boundaries that the film constructs and it is noteworthy how ingeniously the film manages to invert the limitations of technology to by highlighting the use of writing and the written text in the film as exemplary instances of mobility and fluidity. But apart from its recourse to a playful version of an early mode of representation of the king in Ginzburg’s sense, the film also invests a sense of dread in evoking wax figures that come to life. In this respect, the film brings into play the mobile ubiquity of the Caliph’s sexual powers but then takes pains to reduce this power, as if the colossal bodily mass of Jannings’ Caliph in the opening sequence<sup>87</sup> needs to be contained within

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<sup>87</sup> While I do not want to put too much of an emphasis on an intertextual trajectory that is suggested by a contemporary reference point in popular culture, it is worth noting that, given George Lucas’ “homage” to Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* at the conclusion of his 1977 film *Star Wars*, Jannings here appears strikingly similar to the “Jabba the Hutt” character (in *Star Wars: Episode VI - The Return of the Jedi*, Richard Marquand, USA 1983), a gargantuan Orientalized mass of mediaeval sexual appetite.

a bowdlerized version of an upbeat *Arabian Nights* tale.<sup>88</sup> What this points to is an interesting unease surrounding the body as a locus of power.

The relation between writing and the body, then, is marked in *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* as a figure of replication and substitution. A narrative is inscribed onto the screen for the waxen replica of the body, which enables the film's mobility to move to an archaic fantasy space of Baghdad. This narrative, in turn, becomes a comic account of how the wax figure substitutes for the real body of the Caliph, so that his physical needs can be attended to. The possibility of terror, which the film evokes by using wax figures, is relegated into the ostensible safety of the written account of a fantastical past. However, in the shift from writing to image, the film also engages a fear of the indeterminacy between figure and body or between image and impersonation. The wax figures on display in the panopticon are replicas that the film brings to "life" and yet their presence indicates a doubling effect by which the figures are both alive and dead, present and absent, at the same time. This doubling, of course, constitutes the foundation of the cinematic image itself, but what the film achieves here is to narrativize this dilemma by posing it as a problem of replication in the doubling of the body itself.

Carlo Ginzburg has demonstrated that this understanding of figures of substitution predates the later emergence of the category of a more abstract representation, which had profound influences "in the spheres of theology and of political liturgy" of the thirteenth century.<sup>89</sup> The consequences of this, therefore, Ginzburg argues, result in a "domesticating

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<sup>88</sup> In the conclusion of this sequence, Zarah elicits for her husband the position of Court Baker, while the Caliph does not get to consummate his desires for Zarah.

<sup>89</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, "Representation: The Word, The Idea, The Thing," p. 78.

images,” a process that minimizes the “fear of idolatry” through abstraction.<sup>90</sup> Most importantly, Ginzburg concludes, is the “dogma of transubstantiation” in this regard, because it indicates that it, “inasmuch as it denied sense data in the name of a profound and invisible reality, may be interpreted ... as an extraordinary victory of abstraction.”<sup>91</sup> In the mode of doubling the presence of the Caliph as a figure and a body, the film resorts to the invocation of the dilemma between presence and absence. Indeed, the film concludes with a brief episode in which the writer of the stories embedded within the film becomes trapped in a nightmare of his own writing, where he himself is hunted by Jack the Ripper until he awakes from his own self-produced fantasy.<sup>92</sup>

Without branching out into a larger discussion of the leadership roles that Jannings after these initial successes took on subsequently, it may suffice to point out that the figure of Jannings frequently becomes the site around which issues of power and authority are articulated. In fact, Kenneth Calhoon has specifically argued that to analyze Jannings’ screen dominance means “to acknowledge the place of the body in the history of modern domination.”<sup>93</sup> Calhoon points to a paradox in representation that concerns both the position of the king in absolutism and the architecture of power in the Third Reich: how to “sustain the centrality of the king’s [and the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>92</sup> Apparently the film ends rather abruptly because Paul Leni was denied further financial backing by the studio. Nonetheless, this ending seems congruent with the importance the film places on the “real” consequences of abstract writing and thus emblemizes its own dilemma.

<sup>93</sup> Kenneth S. Calhoon, “Emil Jannings, Falstaff, and the Spectacle of the Body Natural,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 1997): 83.

*Führer's*] person in the face of ever more abstract and impersonal forms of control.”<sup>94</sup> Calhoon explicitly draws the connection to the “idiom of the baroque” here,<sup>95</sup> since Jannings, as “Falstaff’s heir, activates a voice that interprets a twentieth-century crisis in light of an earlier shift in power and its representation.”<sup>96</sup>

Calhoon argues that in *Henry IV* the duality between the king’s body and his role is facilitated by Falstaff, so that his “ultimate abandonment marks a consolidation of power that leaves the body behind as discarded ballast.”<sup>97</sup> According to Calhoon, this divergence between power and the body finds its ultimate fulfillment in the absolutist state, which, therefore becomes a problem for the historical film in the Third Reich since absolutism attempts to “sustain the centrality of the king’s person in the face of ever more abstract and impersonal forms of executive control.”<sup>98</sup> The strategies by which representations of the monarch in Nazi cinema therefore address this divergence is through the body of Emil Jannings as an incorporation of the leader, whose “irresistible physicality appears to satisfy a general nostalgia” and thus “supplies a palpability that the hollow spectacle of Nazi power could not even simulate.”<sup>99</sup> In the figure of Jannings Nazi cinema latches on to a mode of physical embodiment of power that Jannings had already performed in *Der blaue Engel* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1929). In this film the palpable and physical authority of Jannings results in a “grotesque martyrdom,” which, in its semblance to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 96 (following Rainer Nägele).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

a crucifixion, “stages a regression to an irreducible physicality – and sadness – at which the body reverberates with a creatural agony that negates transcendence.”<sup>100</sup>

Calhoon’s argument focuses on the centrality of this abject return to a physical suffering that characterizes the figure of the ruler in Nazi cinema. In order to ground the abstract functions of power, historical films in the Nazi period necessitate “a renewed physicality that counteracts the disembodiment required by the political absolute.”<sup>101</sup> Calhoon draws an explicit connection between this fascination with the decline of physical authority at a time of abstracted power and the function of allegory. While Calhoon references Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* in this context, he does not emphasize the convergence between the baroque *Trauerspiel* and its depiction of the king’s suffering as the passion of Christ. Benjamin insists on the structural similarity between the martyrdom of the king in the *Trauerspiel* and of Christ: “Just as Christ, the King, suffered in the name of mankind, so, in the eyes of the writers of the baroque, does royalty in general.”<sup>102</sup>

Jannings’ body thus enacts a suffering of sheer physical power *in the name* of a larger entity. Understood in this way, Jannings comes to embody the suffering of the people by an act of substitution. It is this intertextual point of reference that we need to keep in mind in order to adequately evaluate the significance of his depiction of monarchs, rulers, and father figures. To contemporary audiences, of course, his corporeal filmic presence would have readily been associated with the hyperdramatized decline of the Weimar *petit bourgeois* citizen in the films *The Last Laugh* and the *Blue Angel*. In both cases an imposing authority figure is reduced to a

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>102</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1996), p. 73.

pathetic figure of abject humiliation. The Hotel Doorman in *The Last Laugh*, whose commandeering presence is bolstered by a gigantic fantasy uniform, an eclectic assemblage of part Prussian military style, part Napoleonic general, and a large dose of *Hotel Atlantic* corporate identity, is demoted to the hotel's washroom, where he awaits his end with tired, drooping eyes and shoulders slumped. This form of corporal punishment is repeated in *The Blue Angel*, where Professor Rath is reduced to Professor Unrat. In a clown's costume and croaking like a rooster, Professor Unrat, before a man of high standing and authority, now cowers as a man who has been subjected to the epitome of humiliation. The abject state in which Jannings as the authority figure is reduced to animalistic cries at the end of *The Blue Angel* certainly brings a physical dimension to the crisis of authority. His body in grotesque postures exemplifies the decline and fall of the *Kleinbürger*. But having suffered his ultimate moment of despair and ridicule, Rath returns to his classroom where he dies. The question, however, then becomes in whose name such defeat and such sacrifice are being staged.<sup>103</sup>

This motif of humiliation and its obverse manifestation as a matter of honor is, of course, a very prominent theme in the cinema of the Third Reich.<sup>104</sup> It has been frequently remarked that both characters can be understood as representative of the Weimar German post-war middle class. Siegfried Kracauer describes Professor Unrat and the Hotel Porter as one "archetypal" character, who, "instead of becoming an adult, engages in a process of retrogression effected

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<sup>103</sup> In a profound fusion of the voice with the figure of authority, Jannings also narrated the first Ufa sound newsreel in an "upbeat talking-picture speech" on Sept. 10, 1930. Cf. Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 177. Of course, Jannings also embodied the star persona as the first winner of the "Oscar" awards.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. for example, *Die Reise nach Tilsit* (Veit Harlan, 1939).

with ostentatious self-pity”<sup>105</sup> and thus concludes that “in the wake of retrogression terrible outbursts of sadism are inevitable.”<sup>106</sup> If we regard these narratives of physical conversion therefore as indicative of a larger mental malaise, to follow Kracauer, they may serve to point to the question of how to negotiate between the body of the actor and the body politic. This may seem self-evident on a narrative level in the sense that these films *enact* the story of the social downfall of the individual. Yet this downfall seems to be linked to the problem of witnessing suffering as a public spectacle vis-à-vis its revelation in private. The penultimate downfall of both the Hotel Porter and Professor Unrat takes place in the public sphere.

Nonetheless, their final defeat is witnessed by no one except the film’s actual or imagined audiences. No one, that is, except for the substitute figures who witness the same moments of defeat that the audiences witness and thus stand in for the larger crowds. These figures are the clown and school beadle in *The Blue Angel*, whom Kracauer describes as the two “mute” figures of the film. They “witness,” Kracauer states, “but do not participate. Whatever they may feel, they refrain from interference. Their silent resignation foreshadows the passivity of many people under totalitarian rule.”<sup>107</sup> In the same manner, the benevolent night porter in *The Last Laugh*, whose flashlight illuminates the dying figure of Emil Jannings before his miraculous resurrection, never utters a word. Their place within the film is to substitute for our own lack of interfering power. The masses that partake in the witnessing of these moments of defeat find their corresponding figure within the film. They are reduced to a single figure of acceptance, male, mute, and powerless.

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<sup>105</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, p. 218.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.



Apart from the fact that the implied spectatorial gaze is gendered as male here by an act of substitution, the significance of this substitution lies in the moment where the act of witnessing is now no longer a public spectacle but rather takes place in private. While the witnesses in both *The Last Laugh* and *The Blue Angel* are representatives of the very class stratum into which the protagonists tragically descend, they stand in for the audience as well. *The Blue Angel* adds a disciplinary dimension to the notion of witnessing as well. When the Professor collapses on his desk, the camera repeats a movement that it has performed several times throughout the film, namely a tracking shot pulling away from the Professor's desk toward the back rows of the students' desk. In the final sequence, of course, the students' benches are empty. But the seats in the movie theaters, by implication, will be filled with audience members witnessing this spectacle of defeat. The suggestion here is that the gaze which bears witness to the Professor's death has in some way been implicated in it. The masses in the crowded nightclub from the sequence before are now absent, yet the desire to witness humiliation has come to its logical conclusion. The death of the authority figures is staged before the students in the audience. The destructive desire of the masses has found its victim, who is now slumped and, in his rigid posture as he clings to the wood, crucified on his desk.

The difficulty of this tragedy of the fall from power and grace lies in determining exactly what kind of affective registers are enacted here. In Kracauer's terms, the film enacts a regressive fantasy whereby the authority figure is revealed to be the "archetypal character" of "the philistine" he has always been.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, the film mobilizes the inherent "sadism" of the masses who "are irresistibly attracted by the spectacle of torture and

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

humiliation,”<sup>109</sup> as Kracauer states. But even if this were the case, the ending suggests an awareness of Kracauer’s insight. “Look what you have done to this formerly irreproachable man of integrity” the final scenes seem to say, while they offer up the corpse of a former tyrant or authoritarian ruler at the same time. In this wavering oscillation between these two registers of meaning, the film places the spectator in a position of blame. By emphasizing the rows of empty school benches the film insists on a disciplinary resolution. Like a student on the bench, the spectator is differentiated from the earlier masses as an individual and called upon to reflect on what his desires have wrought.

Through this differentiation, which at the same time is attached to a testimony in silence, the individual bears the responsibility for the action of the masses. The figure of authority, then, is emblemized in its sacrifice for the desire of the masses, yet the individual is made to reflect on their consequences. This move inverts the structure of power by showing the frailty of the leader and by displacing the blame for his failure onto the individual. Yet the divestiture of power yields no actual conclusion. It demands to be witnessed in silence and without consequent action. These instances of mute witnessing, therefore, articulate a loss of the connection between the power of the masses and the individual.

Without necessarily putting this observation into a teleological sequence that prefigures the manner in which the cinema of the Nazi period will attempt to discipline the spectator, it is important to note that the iconography of the body in suffering as a trope will remain crucial for depicting the relation between the masses and the individual beyond Weimar cinema. Thus, the reason the figure of Jannings returns to embody the body of power in the cinema of the Third Reich can be found in the connection between the sovereign as frail and fallible and as the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

embodiment of the abstract state of power. The masses, then, have no place on the screen because they are no longer important for the configuration of power; rather, they are addressed as individuals in relation to what they are witnessing. The religious dimension of witnessing the figure of the sovereign as a burdened individual yields a disciplinary paradox of implication for the spectator. As a trope, the genealogy of this mode can be explicitly linked to its baroque manifestation in the German *Trauerspiel*. As Benjamin makes clear, the “downfall of the tyrant” cannot yield an “easy moral satisfaction, ... [f]or if the tyrant falls, not simply in his own name, but as a ruler and in the name of mankind and history, then his fall has the quality of a judgment, in which the subject too is implicated.”<sup>110</sup>

In this sense we can understand Benjamin’s dictum that the “function of the tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency: a dictatorship whose utopian goal will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature”<sup>111</sup> in the baroque drama also functions for the cinematic representations of power in the historical dramas of Nazi cinema. The abdication and suffering of power results in a secular martyrdom that keeps in place the utopia of a natural law in history. Benjamin connects this function to a concomitant female figure of chastity whose role is “to establish a corresponding fortification against a state of emergency in the soul, the rule of emotions.”<sup>112</sup>

In cinematic terms this doubling of roles, the tyrant as the embodiment of the desire for order set against a female figure who is fortified against an “affective” state of disorder, is staged as a disciplinary conception that individualizes the spectator. By implicating the spectator as the

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<sup>110</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 72.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

subject who witnesses the male tyrant in his downfall, the responsibility for what we see is shifted to the individual. Despite its status as a mass spectacle, the cinema here goes to great lengths in order to ensure that the individualization of power is replicated in the individualization of the spectator as silent witness. This replication becomes important again when we consider how Jannings comes to embody the leader of the Boers in *Ohm Krüger*.

So far, the discussion of Jannings has been circuitous in the sense that these layers of meaning do not pertain directly to the narrative of the film *Ohm Krüger* itself, but open up the question of how the film contains meaning in both senses of the word. That is, what has been described above must be brought to bear on the meanings inflected within the film in order to determine how to understand it. On the one hand, this indicates that our discussion of how a film signifies must take into consideration the authorial inscriptions that the film's star contributes in the production of meaning. On the other hand this also points to the question of what to include in the interpretation of meaning, or, respectively, what to *exclude* from the horizons of signification. In this context, the term "excess" has been useful to indicate a range of meaning beyond the narrative level, but in order to take seriously this form of meaning production, the shift away from Kristen Thompson's concept of "cinematic excess" as a way of quantifying the textual and aesthetic operations of meaning is necessary.

Rather than using an "excessive" category of meaning that permits a viewer who "is no longer constrained by conventions of reading" in order to turn the filmic work into a "perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length,"<sup>113</sup> the problem of excess points to the very limit of meaning production itself. It is at this "excessive" level of meaning that the

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<sup>113</sup> Kristen Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 141.

textual work points to its own aporias and postulates a mode of interpretation that follows these markers of irresolution carefully. Such a mode of rigorous interpretation seems particularly relevant for a cinema that is a priori discussed as having ramifications beyond and outside the textual framework, namely propaganda films in general and Nazi cinema in particular. The problem lies precisely in the act of recognition that sees a film as generating levels of meaning that cannot be restricted to the text itself, yet refuses to take this insight seriously. What is cast into relief, then, is the emergence of a necessity to consider the very foundations that extend or support the frames of meaning within a text.

Jacques Derrida has been instrumental in addressing this question from a perspective that traces a mode of signification which runs *across* textual and interpretive frameworks and exposes these frames as the precondition that enables a distinction “between the internal or proper sense and the circumstances of the object being talked about.”<sup>114</sup> The result of this distinction “organizes all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such” by presupposing a “discourse on the limit between the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame*.”<sup>115</sup> Derrida emphasizes the *parergon* here as exemplifying that which lies neither within “the work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d’oeuvre*], neither above nor below,” so that “it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 9. (Emphasis in original.)

In particular, the problematics inherent in the distinction between what constitutes a text and what constitutes an image as Derrida describes it in *The Truth in Painting* will become relevant later on, but for now his discussion of the Kantian use of the term *colossal* is immediately pertinent in this respect. In considering the colossal as a concept which, by virtue of its prodigious and “monstrous” qualities, cannot be presented adequately because “it is ‘almost too large,’” Derrida formulates the question of “how are we to think, in the presence of a presentation, the standing-there-upright (*Darstellen*) of an excess of size which remains merely *almost* excessive, at the barely crossed edge of a limiting line [*trait*]? And which is incised, so to speak, in excess?”<sup>117</sup> In other words, the colossal determines that which is in and of itself too excessive to be contained in a presentation and therefore eludes the framing of representation. However, in its excessive character the colossal provides the edge of a limiting line that outlines the excessive dimension.

This emphasis on the colossal brings us back to the excessive corporeal presence that accompanies a Jannings’ film and defines his acting style throughout his career. It needs to be analyzed in relation to existing studies on the functions of the body in fascism because Jannings’ physical presence embodies a mode that does not necessarily correspond to the groundbreaking work done by Klaus Theweleit. While Theweleit investigates the mechanisms by which corporeal materiality becomes abstracted and channeled in fascism,<sup>118</sup> Jannings’ physical embodiment of leaders offers a countermovement that in its excessive materiality complements the dissolution of the individual body within the larger structures of fascism.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 125. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien, Bd. 2: Männerkörper. Zur Psychoanalyse des weißen Terrors* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995).

One of Theweleit's immense contributions to the analysis of the functions of the body in and for fascism explains how the unity that is created out of the masses of the people presupposes a power relation in which unity does not equate equality. Rather, "the unity of which the fascist speaks is a ... forceful merging of oppressor and oppressed into a power structure [*Herrschaftsgebilde*]. Indeed, unity in general indicates a power relation, not an equal relation. Equality would be heterogeneity, masses; it is precisely the opposite of 'unity,' which is necessarily constructed out of above/below, outside/inside, etc."<sup>119</sup> Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the molar "paranoid-fascist" formations that describe the developments in the organization of masses, Theweleit investigates the transition of unruly and chaotic masses into "the people." The masses become clustered into the unity of a people by the influence of a leader who molds the masses into a people. Theweleit demonstrates how this conception is already in place in the writing of Goebbels' 1929 novel *Michael* or in the works of the author Hans Blüher, who declares that "the masses become the people when they obey," and thus draws an analogy to a magnetic field which arranges the people in "formation": "'the masses' have to be shown their place by gun shots and rifle butts; 'the people,' by contrast, seem to be the kind of 'below' which willingly forms itself into one of the 'unities' that the ruler man/race/nation needs in order to rule."<sup>120</sup>

The explicit coercion that such a physical transformation necessitates finds its correspondence in the cultural configurations that represent these practices to the mass audiences in the cinema. By focusing on this relation between coercion and consensus, "[t]he object is not to obscure or minimize the barbarism of Fascism but to assess its forms differently," as Marcia

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 89 – 90. (Translation mine.)

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 97. (Translation mine.)

Landy notes, in order “to interrogate the complex and contradictory ways in which social relations came to be represented and particularly its relation to conceptions of consensus.”<sup>121</sup> It is at this intersection, where the formation of the masses into a people as it is reflected to the masses that will constitute the cinema’s audience, that *Ohm Krüger* indicates how complex and contradictory these mechanisms are indeed.

Therefore, one of the fundamental instances which provides insight into how such contradictions are expressed belongs to the category of writing as figuration. Just as the figure of Jannings inscribes its complex layers of meaning into the film, actual instances of the process of inscription serve to demonstrate the film’s difficulties in mitigating the tensions generated by its own form. Such mitigating mechanisms can be located from the outset in the film’s credit sequence which is characterized by a “modern” typography superimposed over wooden grooves with an elaborate orchestral score. This suggests both permanence and contemporaneous ephemerality at the same time. The use of a typescript that evokes a relevance to contemporary, that is, “modern” preoccupations which the film will generate is nonetheless grounded in an organic and naturally progressive sense of history as depicted through the image of timber, engraved with the curvatures of time. In accordance with its production history described above and the significance of the figure of Jannings, the film is billed as “ein Emil Jannings-Film.”<sup>122</sup>

Noteworthy here is the duration in the transition between names of the cast of characters: following the relatively brief appearance of the name Emil Jannings as “Ohm Krüger,” because

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<sup>121</sup> Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930 – 1943* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>122</sup> This is followed by “Gesamtleitung Emil Jannings” with a script by Harald Bratt and Kurt Heuser, “unter freier Benutzung von Motiven aus dem Roman · Mann ohne Volk · von Arnold Krieger.” Cf. Wallstein, “*Ohm Krüger*,” for a discussion of the connections between the film’s adaptation and the original novel.



of the ostensible nominal fusion between both names into one entity, the title of Ferdinand Marian's name, playing Cecil Rhodes, lingers considerably longer on the screen than all other actors' names and is accompanied by a musical transition from triumphant to ominous. This serves as a cue to both the characteristics of his fictional character and the fictitious nature of his acting. In terms of the duration of the written names on the screen, Marian's name stands in tribute to his acting skills. Here name and character must not be fused, but, on the contrary, need to be disarticulated in order to emphasize the performative aspect of Marian playing Rhodes, again confirming what Linda Schulte-Sasse has observed, namely that "the first five minutes of any Nazi film feature generally tells us where our emotional alignment belongs."<sup>123</sup> As part of the cast billing, Jannings as the first name thus remains on-screen here for five seconds, whereas Marian's name stays on for a full 12 seconds. All other on-screen single credit names are exchanged after a brief period of circa three seconds.

Precisely because this is a minute detail that might not be encapsulated in any particular narrative trajectory, especially as it is situated within a credit sequence, which by this virtue, is clearly demarcated as outside of the filmic diegesis, this shift in duration signals an important "pedagogical" impetus and already prefigures the film's subsequent relation to its audience. First and foremost, this mechanism of linking the typography of the star's name with a shift in the musical soundtrack suggests a peculiar dimension of scale. The film here goes to great lengths to imbue a small detail with significance and the screen writing of the credit sequence thus functions as a moment of *mise-en-abyme* by which the film's larger formal concerns are replicated within smaller entities of meaning. While this may indicate a tight level of control that

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<sup>123</sup> Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, p. 232.

is generated through an “aggressive coherence” of form,<sup>124</sup> it also signals an metonymical understanding of how small details within the film stand in relation to larger parts. Already in the credit sequence, akin to the introduction of themes and motifs in an orchestral overture, the film sets out to determine how the minute will relate to the monumental and how history will resonate with contemporary concerns.

Moreover, by highlighting the name of Ferdinand Marian through the use of a prolonged duration and the score’s shift in tonal register, this moment in the credit sequence serves to underscore the audience’s familiarity with Marian as the actor who portrayed Joseph Süss Oppenheimer in *Jud Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940) and seems intent on conditioning an “appropriate” response to the figure of Cecil Rhodes by invoking a predetermined intertextual yoking of the figures of Rhodes, Oppenheimer, and Marian, and the larger association of the British Empire with Jews, which, while implicit, will structure the film in general. In this respect, the film’s credit sequence already indicates the investment that *Ohm Krüger* will place in the relation of individual figures to their historical significance and how the film will extrapolate their relation to each other. What is important, therefore, is how the film already assumes in its credit sequence the position of an audience for whom this film, under the disguise of a biopic, will elaborate the relation encoded by the actors’ iconography as stars. That is, the audience’s knowledge of the star figures of Jannings and Marian already determines and postulates how these figures will signify as historical characters.

In order to emphasize this understanding of history that the film posits, the opening sequence makes explicit how the film assumes its own audience. The aging Ohm Krüger, having lost the war against Great Britain, has taken refuge in a Swiss sanatorium. Here an international

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<sup>124</sup> I am indebted to Seth Graham for this phrase.

press corps has assembled, eager to write up dismissive gossip about a failed head of state. French, American, and British journalists congregate in the hotel lobby and attempt to garner an interview with Krüger in exile. In their eagerness to gain access to Krüger the journalists reveal themselves to be both sensationalist and self-absorbed. Rather than a concern with history in the making, they display a petty concern with scandal and “politics.” Linda Schulte-Sasse notes how this sequence alludes to a Weimar print culture that is identified as Jewish and as an instrument of capitalism.<sup>125</sup> In contradistinction to the bustle down below, Krüger’s room is solemn and dark. Krüger’s eminent physician is told by a nurse that he no longer tolerates light and the physician, having noticed newspapers next to Krüger, informs him that they are “poison” for him since he should no longer concern himself with worldly matters.

At this moment one of the pertinacious journalists gains access to the room and insists on taking a picture. The flashlight illuminates an aging figure sitting upright in a chair. With its rigid and immobile posture, its eyes seemingly hollowed out by black sunglasses, the figure resembles a death mask of a corpse. This is how we are introduced to “Paulus ‘Oom’ Kruger.” The camera imposes its flashing light onto a corporeal dying figure that bears no resemblance to the “historical” or abstract image of a famous Boer leader. The paradoxical importance of this introductory image lies in the very distinction that the film sets up from the outset here. By positing the physicality of the protagonist as a briefly illuminated face of death, the film on the one hand already insists on the impossibility to reconcile fleeting physical presence with historical abstraction. Yet on the other hand the film will mobilize a significant amount of textual force to counteract this very claim.

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<sup>125</sup> Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, p. 288.

To be sure, we are witness to the impending death of Krüger, yet for us his image is reduced to a brief ghostlike flash. The death mask of his face records the potential futility of connecting historical achievements to this particular body and the fact that this image of the body has been captured by the camera underscores the distance between the knowledge of history and the actual person. In this sense, the film seems to suggest that the person we see on the screen cannot yet be reconciled with our knowledge of Oom Kruger the historical figure. The illumination of Krüger as a “living corpse,” as it were, highlights the inherent contradiction of the photographic medium that records and captures a moment of life, but, in so doing, is linked inexorably to death because the photograph itself, frozen in its own temporality, becomes the ghost-image of life. We are introduced to a great leader in his moment of decline. His face now resembles a skull with hollow eyes, his skin is pale and white and lifeless, and his body remains rigidly immobile, tightly secured under a heavy blanket on which his hands rest.

The image presents us with an emblem of power in its impotence, yet the opening sequence mobilizes a divergent notion of the figure of the leader. While Ohm Krüger is by now a mere effigy in the sanatorium, that is, an empty shell of the king’s body, the film will attempt to “resurrect” this dying body. In its initial preoccupation with death, the film therefore uses the figure of Krüger as an allegorical mode of signification, which, as Walter Benjamin has determined, confronts the observer “with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.”<sup>126</sup> Here history resides in the dying body and yet this very history has not yet been “written” by the film.

This impasse creates a twofold tension. On the one hand, it assumes that the physical body of history is fragile, aging, and “decomposing” in the sense that the body has become

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<sup>126</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

merely an old shell of a great spirit. In this respect it also emphasizes the distance between contemporary audiences and history by already evoking the question of what it is, exactly, that “history” records. Here, “history” records the banalities of a dying and immobile body, suffering from “eye trouble,”<sup>127</sup> and the photograph captures only a corpseslike ghost. Yet at the same time, the dying body promises to deliver its history as “natural” because the baroque function of allegory is, in Benjamin's words, to show that “[e]verything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head.”<sup>128</sup> The very beginning of the film, then, demonstrates the progress of history as pitiful and “unsuccessful,” but it turns the linear temporal progression of this process into a metaleptic narrative by showing the results before the causes and by emphasizing the conclusion of defeat before embarking on a cinematic reincarnation of the dying figure before us.

By contrast to this allegorization, the journalists as the chroniclers of the first version of history are merely engaged in the politics of gossip and sensationalism. Their interest consists solely in the newsworthiness of how Krüger is dying in exile. Schulte-Sasse remarks how this moment emphasizes the film’s privileging a conception of history as speech, as an “oral history” which “becomes a vehicle of Truth juxtaposed with the distorted truth propagated by the press as a ‘machine’ of capitalism.”<sup>129</sup> The obsession with recording the impending death of Krüger marks the journalists as interested only in the fleeting moments of physicality. In other words, the archive of history as newspaper documents and photographs provides no insights into the real

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<sup>127</sup> “Der Herr Präsident ist augenkrank,” the nurse tells the intruding journalist. Schulte-Sasse notes that the reporter is from the *Berliner Tageblatt*, “a well-known ‘Jewish’ newspaper.” Cf. Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, p. 288.

<sup>128</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

<sup>129</sup> Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich*, p. 288.

concept of history as the film imagines it. Yet at the same time the film shares this baroque fascination with the body of history. But instead of the record of newspapers, the pictures of which will arrest and capture only a momentary glimpse of the dying Krüger, the film promises to provide a different view of history. “Are we alone, Nurse?” asks Krüger and orders his nurse to open the curtains, despite the fact that he can no longer distinguish between light and dark. As the nurse opens the window, light floods the room and illuminates the figure. What is striking here is the intensity with which the light beams emblaze Krüger, intensified even more by the off-screen noise of first the curtains and then the blinds opening until Krüger is able to sense “the warmth of the sun on his skin.” This is the flash of the photograph elongated into a “slow motion” illumination that only film can provide, so that we are now seeing clearly the person who until now has remained a brief glimpse and a disembodied voice.

This differentiation between the newspaper photograph’s flash of the momentary and the long literal illumination that the film provides is reflected in and linked to another significant dichotomy as well. Krüger insists that his nurse read him the newspaper accounts. As she reads to him in a quaint Swiss-accented German from a resolutely celebratory article in *The Times* about the loss of Boer independence and the glory of the British Empire, she hesitates when she comes to a line reporting a general pardon with “the exception of one person.” Sensing the divergence between the malicious writing in her hands and the blind figure who constitutes “the exception” before her eyes, she assures him that nobody who knows him in person will believe such a story. Krüger, however, pronounces apodictically that “the world forgets fast” and that such lies will be believed if they are only repeated often enough.

Once more, the film sets out to comment on the construction of commonsensical fabrications of historical understanding: the repetition of lies engenders the creation of historical

narratives that become the truth. The film, however, foregrounds this mechanism while at the same time participating in its very construction. This is all the more important to emphasize since studies of propaganda frequently minimize the formal complexity of the texts they examine, finding recourse, instead, to a clinical conceptualization that assumes a coherence and transparency; conversely, such transparency is precisely what the propagandistic text insists on, which, then, constitutes a curious blind spot in the analysis of these works. *Ohm Krüger* offers up the insight that lies will become the truth through repetition, while insisting that the film consists of the particular exception to this idea on textual and narrative grounds.

Resigned to accept his fate in this state of exception, Krüger asks the nurse what she herself thinks of the article. She hesitates. “Don’t *you* wonder why he did not come to terms with the English?” Krüger asks rhetorically and answers himself, “one cannot come to terms with the English!”<sup>130</sup> The film renders as a “truism” from the outset what it will take great pains to demonstrate and assert time and again in the course of its narrative. This observation need not be significant to note, since it might serve as an exemplary moment of how a text deconstructs its own foundational premises and how ideological forces attempt to erase their inherent contradictions. However, in the categorical insistence on the inability to communicate with “the English” and the lack of trust the film posits for newspaper records, the gravity of this utterance bestows an importance to the scene that must be underscored by the image of Krüger in its allegorical dimension.

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<sup>130</sup> In the original: “Warum hat er sich nicht mit den Engländern verständigt? Mit Engländern kann man sich nicht verständigen!”

With this authoritative proclamation, Krüger proceeds to inform the nurse about the two hundred years his ancestors lived in peace until “the English” came.<sup>131</sup> As if to set the record straight, Krüger begins to narrate the story of his people, driven by the desire for a *Lebensraum*. His head immobile and his gaze obstructed by the black circles of his glasses as they magnify his hollow eyes, framed in a medium close-up, he becomes the pure voice of history as the mythical story of ancestors: “Our Forefathers said ‘it cannot be the will of our Creator that an entire people shall live in slavery.’ And so we marched deeper into the interior of Africa, searching for new plains and new land.” During the progress of this narration the camera gradually moves back as Krüger’s voice begins to detach itself from the mortal body and by the time he intones the name “Afrika” his face resembles a skull that has dissolved into the majestic sweeping clouds above a grandiose panorama of cattle marching across the South African steppes.

At this point Krüger’s voice becomes the narrator of myth, both as the story of the originative creation of a people and as its constitutive exodus at the same time. With the solemnity and authority of the archetypal blind storyteller, Homer, the film becomes the enunciation of Krüger’s truth, set against the lies and banalities of quotidian newspaper writing.

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<sup>131</sup> Of course, the film’s revisionist rewriting of South African history takes extensive and blatant license to distort or invent historical facts, which, as such, would necessarily have to be addressed. Moreover, Ohm Krüger became part of a vast number of Soviet “booty films” that were captured from the archives by the Soviet Army during World War II as war bounty and “were thrown into Soviet distribution on a mass scale, without subtitles and often under different names.” Cf. Maya Turovskaya, “The 1930s and 1940s: Cinema in Context,” in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 51. This crucial instance of circulation, which constitutes a remarkable instance of extrafilmic *mobilization*, exceeds the framework of this study, but is worth investigating for its importance in indicating the flexibility that Jannings’ figure carries across ideological boundaries.



It is the voice that offers a truth linked to the irrefutability of images as a presence. And this voice offers incantations on a magnificent “eternal” and “infinite” scale. Moreover, the voice narrates the story of a people in exodus and therefore reconfigures the Boer people, and by extension the Germans, within the frame of the Biblical story of the Jews expelled from Egypt in their long search for the promised land. Marcia Klotz demonstrates that such transferences of identity conceptions are fundamentally operative throughout a number of important Nazi films, but, as she notes, this particular imaginary had already been predicated historically since “many Boers thought of themselves as modern-day Israelites and believed the Great Trek would eventually take them all the way through Africa to Palestine.”<sup>132</sup> As Krüger’s voice accompanies a montage of the trek as an exodus from the Cape land towards the Vaal River, it proclaims:

“Years and years this trek lasted, across desolate deserts, across infinite steppes. The eternal creaking of wheels was the lullaby of our children. In the saddle our boys grew to be men. No strife, no hardship discouraged this people, which knew only one goal: to live in liberty and peace. Beyond the River Vaal we finally found the new home. We were diligent and the Lord’s blessing was with us. Thus was created our new fatherland Transvaal, fought for with our blood, drenched with our sweat. Here we believed we could live in peace. But then the English followed us there.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Marcia Klotz, “Epistemological Ambiguity and the Fascist Text: *Jew Süß*, *Carl Peters*, and *Ohm Krüger*,” *New German Critique* 74 (spring – summer 1998): 118.

<sup>133</sup> “Jahre um Jahre dauerte dieser Zug durch troslose Wüsten, über unendliche Steppen. Das ewige Knarren der Räder war das Wiegenlied unserer Kinder. Im Sattel wuchsen unsere Knaben zu Männern heran. Kein Kampf, kein Mühsal, entmutigten dieses Volk, das nur ein Ziel kannte: in Freiheit und Frieden zu leben. Jenseits des Flusses Vaal fanden wir endlich die neue Heimat. Wir waren fleißig und der Segen des Herrn war mit uns. So entstand unser neues Vaterland Transvaal, mit unserem Blut erkämpft, mit unserem Schweiß getränkt. Hier glaubten wir, in Frieden leben zu können. Aber dann kam uns der Engländer nach.”

This transition initiates another transition through a dissolve to a close-up of Cecil Rhodes' hand, which turns a large globe, while he muses on the innocence and beauty of the African continent ready for the taking in another conquest. This impressive shift in scale once again serves to remind us of the fluidity with which the film encapsulates the transitions whereby the face of Ohm Krüger becomes the story of an entire people in search for "their" land and this land, in turn, becomes a miniaturized representation on the globe in the grip of the British minister Rhodes. The category of the Boers as a nomadic people, whose search for their "fatherland" makes men out of boys "in the saddle," implies another link to a popular German generic narrative of the period, the Western travel writings of Karl May.<sup>134</sup> In this fusion of Biblical and popular narratives, the story as recounted by Ohm Krüger evokes both the profane and the sacrosanct at the same time. The fact that these categories, however, are not necessarily fixed or immutable is emblemized by the dissolve into Rhodes' hand. Against its own assertions of accuracy, the film here already insists, as Marcia Landy has demonstrated, that various narratives of "tradition and modernity" are but "fluid categories, serving to underscore distinctions between the privileged and the outcast."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Most famous for his presumably "authentic" first-person travel accounts across the American West and the Middle East, Karl May (1842 – 1912) had not visited most of the countries he so vividly described at all.

<sup>135</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p. 242. It is particularly striking that even the most privileged and stable binary according to Landy of "the elect" and "the damned" is reversed here; while the dichotomy itself is still rigorously in place, its ascribed function can change. Accordingly, the Boers are a "dammed" people in history, but the myth that the film sets up relegates them ultimately to the "elect." In addition, since the Boers figure as the representatives of the German people, this act of substitution has to be performed by the audience within this mythical frame.

Nonetheless, the film from the outset establishes itself over and against the written text that constitutes the archive of documents available to the future historian. Instead, the faithful historical mode of understanding lies in the recollection of a dying man; history needs to be told and “straightened,” that is, “rewritten,” through the enunciated speech of Ohm Krüger, as he offers us his own historicist rendition of “what it was really like” by looking back as an act of memory beyond subjectivity. History’s audience, in turn, is gendered as a benevolent nurse, a maternal figure who stands in for the audience and who is to receive the account of the narrative. In keeping with this premise, the first half of the film offers us a “pure” and “unadulterated” vision of Krüger’s life according to the conventions of classical narrative cinema, with its shifts between subjective and objective points of view.

However, the transitions between the various dimensions of scale that the film generates in its first ten minutes inaugurates a symptomatic mode which betrays the film’s faith in its own generative power. Analogous to the transition in scale from a dying face to the magnitude of the African plains on a geographical level and its obverse move back to the close-up of a hand covering a globe, this faith in the unambiguous mobility of images which serve the narrative within the proper enunciative mode of history, regardless of its spatial or temporal scale, finds its limit point at the moment when Transvaal is invaded by British troops. Here, Krüger the historical narrator, whom the film has been able to efface as the enunciator of its transitions can no longer remain the narrative authority. As Marcia Klotz puts it, such moments of rupture in Nazi cinema serve as instances of intensification, which emphasize how the films “draw their affective power from the very inconsistencies that would seem to destabilize them.”<sup>136</sup> Consistent with this assessment, Krüger enters the film again as a subjective force by rallying his

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<sup>136</sup> Marcia Klotz, “Epistemological Ambiguity and the Fascist Text,” p. 122.

cabinet together and, in a fervent speech, announces that he will no longer participate in their petty debates. He retreats to sign his letter of resignation as president. The film then moves from this public demonstration of sacrifice to a private and intimate conversation between Rhodes and Krüger.

Rhodes offers to “buy off” Krüger's people and, in order to prove his power, hands him a list of his people's parliamentary representatives that have pledged their allegiance to Rhodes to which Krüger responds by taking note of Rhodes' powers to “epidemicize.”<sup>137</sup> Moreover, Krüger reassumes a stance of anticipation that resonates with the audience's positioning vis-à-vis history. In a violently hysterical outburst, he scolds Rhodes for underestimating his sense of the preordained outcome of their meeting, while a reproduction of da Vinci's “Last Supper” in the background emphasizes the historical scale of this moment. That is, Krüger comes to articulate the assumed audience's knowledge at which the knowledge of the audience merges with the knowledge of the character again. He renounces his own signature of resignation. This moment shifts the course of history as it is imagined in the film towards a unification in scale: Krüger and the audience have once more become one. “This is the moment of decision I have anticipated,” Krüger proclaims, “and now it is has arrived.” “I will remain president,” he cries, “and every single man of my people will be a hero!”

At this point the film abruptly cuts to a bomb exploding as the word *Mobilmachung* (“mobilization”) is superimposed and etched in fiery Gothic letters across the screen, punctuated by the sound of explosions, which is followed by a lengthy montage sequence of the mobilization of forces, which then yields to an increasing mass of people carrying a number of

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<sup>137</sup> The anti-Semitic connotations of the original, presumably neologist verb *durchseuchen*, which connotes Rhodes' abilities to cause a societal pandemic of disease, would certainly have been obvious to contemporary audiences.

signs, placards and posters denouncing “England” in German (!) and Afrikaans, singing “Burenland ist freies Land! Uns von Gott gegeben”<sup>138</sup> down the streets of Pretoria. In this climactic moment, where the pure “speech” of images is abandoned in favor of a literal *inscription* of enlistment and mobilization, while renouncing the signature of a contract and reaffirming the audience’s assumed affective dispositions through a melodramatic shift into song, Krüger and the audience underwrite the mobilization of affect that is necessitated by this shift in scale.

His call to arms results in the masses becoming the people: “I have summoned an army and a whole people answered the call!” narrates Krüger. Up to this point, the masses as a people have not been important because of the imposed unity between Krüger and the Boers. The historical drama so far has been rendered as a conflict between the individual minds of Queen Victoria, Cecil Rhodes, and Krüger, who bargain and attempt to outsmart each other with contracts and negotiations. In fact, the crowd scenes that the film has depicted thus far are scenes in parliaments, which, according to the film’s logic, are not representative of the people. The only moment in which a voice from the crowd speaks for the people, albeit for the British, comes at the moment when Krüger is negotiating a treaty with the Queen. A woman in the crowd states that “this Krüger has made an indelible impression on me, like a mythical giant from times of yore.” This odd moment underscores Jannings as the embodiment of Krüger. Even a British woman from the “historical” past within the film dimly recognizes the primordial power of Krüger as Jannings. Her voice can no longer be represented by the Queen and, instead, avows the film’s true leader outside of history. That is, the mobilization of the film extends to the female in general, irrespective of the narrative affiliation of national identity of the people as such.

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<sup>138</sup> “The land of the Boers is a free country, given to us by God.”

An individual male voice of reason, however, intervenes in this general mobilization and it belongs to Jan, Krüger's son, who states that "all of you have gone insane" and cautions that "war has not yet been declared." As he utters these words he witnesses his father's signature to this effect. War has been declared, by cry, by the inscription of the mobilization into the image, by song, and finally re-legitimized as a declaration through Krüger's signature. The stage has now been set for a redistribution of the conflict onto yet another dimension, that of the Oedipal conflict between father and son. Jan warns his father that their people are not yet a nation and will perish in the war. Moreover, he reveals that he has vowed under oath to become a pacifist because he "studied history" in Oxford. "History is made, not studied, you coward!" thunders Krüger and orders his son out of his sight. His cries of disappointment merge with the sounds of the masses outside. The familial conflict shifts away from his rejection of his son to the needs of "his" Boers who are intoning their song of freedom.

Rejected as a father by his own son, Krüger is summoned back into his burdensome patriarchal position again by the chants of the masses, carrying on the tunes and cheers of mobilization, as a close-up of his face shows the strains of his duty. This moment marks the obverse movement toward the body as described by Theweleit. The body has become the people and the masses, whose voice has been that of Krüger, have now been reconfigured *as* a people. They have been choreographed and mobilized in the service of their father, while the individual son has renounced his place among the people. More importantly, the masses are now merging into a stream that moves toward the camera and that culminates into a procession which ends up in front of Krüger's house. They demand to see him and he finally succumbs to their insistent chants, steps out onto the balcony and surveys his people from above. At this point the unity between Krüger and his people is complete. The people have heeded his call and now summon

him in return. With the incantation, once more, of the song of the Boers the triangulated unity between the people, the film's audience, and Ohm Krüger is solidified.

This unity, however, comes at a price. Krüger loses his eyesight, but his blindness epitomizes his qualities as a visionary and indicates that "he is endowed with insight and prophecy."<sup>139</sup> The prodigal son Jan returns as a Boer soldier and Krüger can only recognize him as one by feeling the belt of bullets slung over his chest. The symptomatology of blindness functions here to indicate the suffering of the mortal body that, once it has been fused with the people, can now regain its own physical frailty. In this act of substitution the film envisions a people whose leader is now burdened with prophetic blindness while the audience serves as a surrogate witness. Jan implores his father to "do the most difficult act," to go to Europe and "beg for your people." While Krüger travels to the European capitals, the women and children of his people are herded into concentration camps. Here the cruel camp commandant Winston Churchill tries to force Krüger's wife to sign a declaration that "all news about their maltreatment in British concentration camps are vicious inventions," but she refuses. When Jan is arrested by the British he is hanged on a hill top in front of all the camp's inmates. The women witness his execution and storm the hill whereupon they are shot and slaughtered by the British soldiers indiscriminately shooting into the masses.

Over this scene of death and destruction the film superimposes the face of the dying Krüger once more, now a deity, constructed from his son's sacrifice which has become his

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<sup>139</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p. 240. Landy also notes the allusion to Hitler's blindness in World War I.

sacrifice again. Jan's Calvary, the mound of his sacrifice,<sup>140</sup> is equated with the skull of Krüger. The landscape of the dead merges with the allegorical face of the dying leader and we return to the beginning of the film. The voice of Ohm Krüger now narrates his own demise but promises redemption, no longer spoken to his nurse, but spoken for the audience he prophesies:

“That was the end! Thus England subjugated our small people with the cruelest of means! But once the day of retribution will arrive. I know not when, but so much blood cannot have been shed in vain. So many tears are not cried for naught. We were only a small and weak people. Great, mighty peoples will rise against British tyranny. They will smite England to the ground. God will be with them. Then the road is open for a better world.”<sup>141</sup>

With these words the superimposed image slowly dissolves back to Krüger's face alone. The *telos* of his narrative has come full circle, but the allegorical dimension that suggests the cyclical nature of history has now been imbued with a temporal significance of suffering and this vanity of sacrifice must be gainsaid once more beyond the frame of the film. As the avuncular presence and colossal corporeality of Emil Jannings has gradually faded again into a death mask of history, Ohm Krüger can now emerge as the allegory of destiny.

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<sup>140</sup> Not accidentally, the image alludes to the Aramaic *Golgotha* or its Latinized version *Calvary*, both denoting “skull” or “scalp,” the Biblical name for the place of Crucifixion.

<sup>141</sup> “Das war das Ende! So hat England unser kleines Volk mit den grausamsten Mitteln unterworfen! Doch einmal wird der Tag der Vergeltung kommen. Ich weiß nicht, wann, aber so viel Blut kann nicht umsonst geflossen sein. So viele Tränen werden nicht vergeblich geweint. Wir waren nur ein kleines und schwaches Volk. Große, mächtige Völker werden gegen die britische Tyrannei aufstehen. Sie werden England zu Boden schlagen. Gott wird mit ihnen sein. Dann ist der Weg frei für eine bessere Welt.”



## CHAPTER SIX: REINSCRIPTIONS OF THE DISPLACED: READING THE WRITING IN WOLFGANG STAUDTE'S *DIE MÖRDER SIND UNTER UNS* AND *ROTATION*

The historical imaginary of *M* already allegorized the figure of the ultimate outsider who is marked by a visible inscription in the systematic effort to differentiate and remove him forcibly from the social body. In its cinematic prophecy the film thus spells out the fate of a person branded by an imposed sign that stigmatizes its bearer as excluded and condemned. In the words of Anton Kaes, the anonymous murderer Beckert is marked so that he “becomes trapped in a bureaucratic system that disciplines by labelling.”<sup>1</sup> But beyond the bureaucratic function of the label in a pervasive system of control, the allegorical use of the mark in the film only prefigures the actual implementation of the infamous *Judenstern*, the yellow Star of David with the word “Jew” imprinted on it that was required to be worn on the outer articles of clothing by everyone legally defined as Jewish. This legal requirement, which was initiated during the occupation of Poland and extended to the Reich in September 1941, indicates once again how easily the Weimar cinematic imagination merges with concrete historical facts in an uncanny *mésalliance* that in Expressionist terms would seem to emerge straight out of the fantasy cabinet of Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Kaes, *M* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 63.

Goebbels. *Ohm Krüger* follows a similar configuration between historical facts and their allegorization as figures whereby the historical plight of a people is reimagined through a complex construction that conflates an ethnic understanding of the Boers with that of the Germans and then replicates this yoking in a kind of reversal of disambiguation within a grandiose conceptual framework that claims for itself a replication of the Jewish experience of diaspora. As Marcia Landy has demonstrated, the film constitutes a figurative anastomosis in which conceptions of the past are recirculated as destiny, so that history converges with the present on a monumental scale in order to portray a suffering nation.<sup>2</sup> This redeployment of the Exodus is then imagined as the fate of the German people, which culminates in a cynical portrayal in which the German people become the apotheosis of victimhood because they are the ones in whose stead the Boers are suffering in concentration camps.

It is in light of such complicated reconfigurations of victimhood in relation to the social body that the opening sequence of the very first German feature film to be completed after the capitulation and the end of the war or, to invoke a current discursive term, the “downfall” of the Reich must be analyzed. Indeed, as will be demonstrated below, Wolfgang Staudte’s 1946 film *Die Mörder sind unter Uns* (*The Murderers are Among Us*), begins with a victim’s return from a concentration camp while it deliberately deploys the cinematic gesture of the mark that became the defining visual moment of the film *M*. Beyond this figural invocation, the film’s title itself establishes an oblique link to *M*. As Siegfried Kracauer recalls in an anecdote, Lang intended to call his film “Murderer Among Us,” and Kracauer uses this as his chapter title for his own discussion of the film and the late Weimar period as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 240 – 241.

In keeping with Lang's predilection for fusing the anecdotal with the dramatic, Kracauer relates how Lang imparted to him the threat that his choice for the film's title had generated. This event, Lang had suggested, served as his own political awakening. When announcements for the film's production were issued, Kracauer states, Lang "[s]oon ... received numerous threatening letters and, still worse, was bluntly refused permission to use the Staaken studio for his film."<sup>3</sup> It was not until Lang clarified to the studio manager, who was a member of the Nazi party, that the film's title was in reference to the case of a child murderer that he was granted access to the studios. This was, as Kracauer suggests, due to the fact that the title caused consternation among party members who recognized their own kind in the title or, as he puts it in his laconic way, "'Murderer among us': the Party feared to be compromised."<sup>4</sup>

While this cinematic link may be anecdotal, the film's opening sequence follows a figural trajectory which the camera traces and which ends with a lingering on the body marked by a sign, along with an inscription that serves as an allegorical *memento mori*. In doing so,

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<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947; reprint, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. The production history of the film indicates that Staudte began to work on the script before the end of the war. The original title that Staudte planned to use was "The Man I Am Going to Kill," based on an event Staudte experienced with a high-ranking SS-officer in Berlin towards the end of the war. In a 1974 interview, Staudte recalled that an *Obersturmbannführer* in a drunken stupor suspected that Staudte was a "communist pig" and threatened to kill him on the spot. When his fellow officers had managed to calm him down again, he declared that he was simply going to return to his business, an apothecary of which he had been the proprietor, "after all this shit is over." Staudte used this incident to reflect on what would happen if he saw this man again in his pharmacy. The film's production materials and documents have been made available online by the *Kulturarchiv* of the Fachhochschule Hannover, where the interview is reprinted at [http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen\\_spiel filme/filme/moerder/staudte1.htm](http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen_spiel filme/filme/moerder/staudte1.htm).

*Murderers Are Among Us* establishes for itself a direct relation to the film *M*, but, more importantly, continues a particular form of signification in which writing functions prominently as a mode of meaning. In its opening, an intertitle on black background announces with an ominous stroke of a gong, “Berlin 1945 – The city has capitulated ...” (“Die Stadt hat kapituliert”). Thus the intertitle heralds its function as a means to place the images to come within a very specific temporal and local context, yet one which is devoid of any human agency and which carries with it a sense of monumental exhaustion that has extended even into the world of material objects, since it is the city itself that has “capitulated” or “given up.” Moreover, in the common synecdochic replacement of the capital Berlin standing as a *pars pro toto* figure for the entire Reich and the German people in it, the intertitle conveys an elementary shift by which the film establishes the human figure as incidental and a mere marginal element in the larger machinations of a city and its social network from the outset.

In so doing, the tone of the title already suggests its indebtedness to a rich filmic heritage, including the genre of the “city film,” and, specifically, to its most famous generic example *Berlin, die Symphonie der Großstadt* (1927, Walter Ruttmann), which also portrays the city as an abstract force that subsumes its inhabitants to its own temporal and spatial rhythms.<sup>5</sup> However, if

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<sup>5</sup> Compare this to the use of opening titles and the credit sequence of Roberto Rossellini’s *Germania anno zero* (1948), which initiates the film by a large and sweeping, almost fluid, panoramic surveyance of the city in ruins. In this sequence images and credits are not separated and the production names are all superimposed. The title itself, as it appears over a vast tracking shot of streets and building in ruins, while structurally similar to *Die Mörder sind unter Uns*, locates and dates the film in a very different way than Staudte’s opening. Especially in its superimposed dedication, “This film is dedicated to the memory of my son Romano Roberto Rossellini,” who had died in 1946, and whose name lingers on-screen as the Berlin Reichstag in ruins moves into view, the use of writing both personalizes and memorializes its relation to particular people. Since the film introduces its protagonist Edmund, a

*Berlin Symphony of a City* celebrates the “abstract geometrics” of which humans are at most a decorative aspect in the depiction of their function as part of the urban fabric,<sup>6</sup> then the intertitle of *Murderers* also announces a telegraphic sobriety that firmly establishes the images to come as belonging to another documentary mode, namely one that echoes the facticity of the newsreel. In the tension created within the two polarities as demarcated by these divergent filmic traditions, the intertitle thus indicates a problematic range of potential spectator responses, with the inherent promise that this very quandary is only temporary and will be resolved and determined by the film. More importantly, however, this introductory intertitle signals another, more pervasively categorical function for the entire film, namely to announce its attempt to put into relief the crucial interplay between text and image and thereby assert the manner by which the human individual is placed within this structure.

In the very first shot that follows, the use of writing as figuration provides a visual commentary on this issue and indicates to what extent the question of framing will animate the mode in which the film places itself in relation to the specific historical situation articulated by

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young child, at the end of the credit sequence, the figure circumscribed here is metonymic rather than synecdochic, inasmuch as it suggests the contiguous possibility of substitution or replacement of individual experience.

<sup>6</sup> See entry “Walter Ruttmann,” in Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel, eds., *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 208. In this respect, the intertitle’s allegiance to the genre of city film serves as an oblique commentary on Ruttmann’s fascination with the force of abstraction. As Elsaesser and Wedel point out, Ruttmann was a fervent adherent of Nazi ideology and he continued his cinematic experiments, creating *Wochenende* (1931), a “film without images, recorded with a sound-on-film camera, and later moving on to filming newsreel footage on the Eastern front, where he died in 1941.” It seems a historical irony, therefore, that the innovator of abstract filmmaking and visual graphics would pen a heavy-handed “anti-Semitic prologue” to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which was discarded in favor of Riefenstahl’s clever use of typography in the titles of *Triumph*’s opening sequence.

the intertitle. After the credit sequence, which precedes the intertitle and is offered in a conventional superimposition over an abstract pattern that suggests the details of a concrete surface, the first seconds of the opening images are highly disjunctive because the sound of the gong has been replaced by an up-tempo music-hall honky-tonk tune, but there is no corresponding source at first to identify this sound. Conversely and equally disjointed, the image reveals a large mound, with a dying plant and a soldier's helmet on its top, and makeshift tubes arranged as if in a T-pattern, until a single, crooked cross comes into view. As the camera tilts up along the mound which houses two makeshift graves, we see a lone male figure walking down a street, past the rubble, the charred remains of military vehicles, a flak gun, and the skeletal outlines of buildings.

The man, we will later learn, is Mertens, played by Ernst Wilhelm Borchert,<sup>7</sup> a surgeon traumatized by his war experiences who has become aimless, depressed, and has taken to drink. In this environment, however, children have already begun to play again amidst the ruins, while the bomb craters still pock-mark the urban landscape, and the general detritus of war surrounds everything. Given that any visible or legible inscription is absent on the crosses save the patterns of the wood markings, the image of the graves in the center of the lopsided compositional field –

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<sup>7</sup> The credits list the names of the actors only, that is, without the names of their corresponding roles, and he is identified in eighth place with the name W. Borchert. He continued to use the name Wilhelm Borchert throughout his intermittent acting and dubbing career until his death in 1990. His name was removed from the program notes to the film's premiere in the Neue Staatsoper in Berlin, on October 16, 1946, because it was revealed that his "questionnaire," the main instrument for the assessment of guilt into five categories that was issued under the denazification directives in the Allied Occupation Zones, had been answered with grossly deceptive and mendacious claims of innocence. Cf. Friedrich Luft, "Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns," *Die Neue Zeitung*, October 18, 1946, reprinted at [http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen\\_spiel filme/filme/moerder/k5.htm](http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen_spiel filme/filme/moerder/k5.htm).

as well as a smaller one placed in the background – emphasizes its own abstract status, that is, its precise opposite from the nominal and individualized reference by virtue of its anonymity and ubiquity. Its function, therefore, suggests the random presence of death scattered about, while at the same time memorializing the individual as an abstraction, much like a memorial such as “the tomb of the unknown soldier” functions as the synecdochic possibility for mourning and memory rather than as the actual memorial itself. The cross on top of the graves punctuates the visual landscape as a marker within it and therefore indicates that the images as a whole must be regarded as a *legible* as much as a *visible* sequence.

The absence of a concretely visible referent for whom the grave has been consecrated suggests that the lone male figure enters the picture as a possible representation or stand-in for the person who is buried under the mound on the street. The anonymous figure enters *in lieu* of the soldiers that have not been identified. With this associative yoking of figure and grave, the image evokes a “homecoming” on a number of different levels. While the obvious contemporary homecoming here would suggest that the male figure is one who is returning home from the war, the proximity between grave and the so-far anonymous person also emphasizes the fact that the buried soldiers will not have this privilege of a return home. Likewise, therefore, the appearance of the figure underscores an existential dimension, in which the haphazard interchangeability between dead soldier and living person is affirmed and the easy exchange of these states of being is evoked. In other words, because of the figural abstraction in the image, the condition of a state of being is asserted instead of being described or developed and this assertion underscores the condition as an abstract existential state. The figure becomes a substitution for and a substitute of the unknown dead and serves as an emphatic reminder of the pervasive presence of the dead amid the landscape of destruction.

In his diary of his travels throughout Europe in the immediate postwar years, *Tagebuch 1946–1949*, the Swiss novelist and playwright Max Frisch offers a very insightful description of a similar scenario, which he encountered in Munich in May of 1946, and which, in its epigrammatic concision, could well have been modeled after the opening sequence of *Murderers*. Frisch offers a brief glimpse in which the seemingly mundane emptiness of existence encapsulates a vast absence into which a history of significance floods. In this interplay between presence and absence he finds a disconcerting phenomenon. He describes a walk on an ordinary weekday past people lounging “like seagulls” at the banks of the river Isar where:

“Even time itself seems like trash; without its proprietors, like the helmet I find in a bomb crater with rubble and rusty tin cans. Not much to see in it, for sure! The helmet is empty and the shape which I hold in my hands is familiar from hundreds of images that plastered our newsstands year after year and which were bought there, year after year, with laughing and singing victors inside its shape ...”<sup>8</sup>

Frisch uses this evocative description to work both with the idea of a history of images circulating in the popular imagination and the substitutional figure of the shape or the form of a helmet, which in its very abstracted emptiness points to the absence of its proper manifestation as

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<sup>8</sup> From Max Frisch, *Tagebuch 1946 – 1949*, published originally in the Suhrkamp Verlag 1950, and reprinted in Hans Magnus Enzensberger, ed., *Europa in Ruinen: Augenzeugenberichte aus den Jahren 1944 – 1948*, ed. Hans Magnus Enzensberger (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), p. 196. In the original: “Sogar die Zeit erscheint wie Ramsch; ohne Eigentümer wie der Helm, den ich in einem Trichter mit Schutt und verrosteten Büchsen finde. Was soll man schon sehen daran! Er ist leer, und die Form, die ich in der Hand habe, kennen wir von hundert Bildern, die jahrelang an unseren Kiosken hingen und gekauft wurden, jahrelang mit lachenden und singenden Siegern drin.” (Translation mine.)



an embodiment of a human face. It is the shape that is asking to be inhabited by the absent human figure, rather than the other way around, where the human figure determines the shape of its own appearance. Frisch's ironic gesture of resignation, *was soll man schon sehen daran*, reads as the implicit question of "is there anything to be seen in this?" It is the same question that the film's opening shot poses. The trash and the rubble invoke a history of "familiar" associations, the "hundreds of images" of which Frisch is reminded, much in the same way that the lone figure in the alien landscape serves as a proxy for the memory of an absent crowd.

As a visual statement, however, both Frisch's description and the film's opening shot of the man walking in the ruins at the same time seem to aggressively assert an inherent absence of meaning beyond their own presence, a problem of filmic images in general; that is, in their quiddity there is nothing to see except that which you see and things are "just" the way that they seem. While this might be termed the "obvious" level of the image, Roland Barthes has investigated a fundamental quality of *signifiante* in the filmic image beyond its communicative or significative level, which he proposes as a pervasive "third meaning – evident, erratic, obstinate" in his reading of stills from Sergei Eisenstein's films.<sup>9</sup> Determining this dimension as an "obtuse meaning"<sup>10</sup> that exceeds the level of communication and information, Barthes calls it the "blunting of a meaning too clear, too violent,"<sup>11</sup> to the point that "analytically, it has something derisory about it."<sup>12</sup> The importance of Barthes' insight is that he moves the

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<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on some Eisenstein Stills," in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

discussion of images away from the “peace of nominations”<sup>13</sup> into the realm of “anaphoric gesture without significant content”<sup>14</sup> that maintains a perpetual state of irritability over the dominion of narrative and syntagma.

This also makes it possible to consider the opening shot of *Murderers Are Among Us* as both a meditation on “nominations” in its evocation of the legibility of the cross as outlined above and as a cinematic gesture of repetition in openings,<sup>15</sup> or, as Barthes states in describing the force of the third meaning, as “the very form of an emergence, of a fold (a crease even) marking the heavy layer of informations and significations.”<sup>16</sup> For Barthes, this presence indicates the necessity of thinking of the third meaning as a kind of legible “seal” or signature” in the filmic image.<sup>17</sup> While Barthes understands this presence as a categorical quality of any textual work – and, indeed, this is where he locates the emergence of the “filmic” itself<sup>18</sup> – it is useful to think of the third meaning in general as an imprint or a colophon within the text that provides it with the inscription of a legibility as such. What the opening shot therefore achieves is to call attention to the manner in which the quality of significance is evoked beyond the fact that this

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Note that the rhetorical device of *anaphora* indicates the “repetition of a word or a phrase at the *beginning* of several successive verses, clauses, or paragraphs.” (Cf. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “anaphora.” My emphasis.)

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ibid. “[T]he third meaning structures the film *differently* without ... subverting the story and for this reason, perhaps, it is at the level of the third meaning, and at that level alone, that the ‘filmic’ finally emerges.” (Emphasis in original.)

would pertain to the function of any introductory shot. Lest this function, however, be dismissed as a merely formal element of the image, the permanent irritability, or in Barthes' term, the "bodily" sensitivity maintained by the "perpetual erethism"<sup>19</sup> of the third meaning, points to an important physical aspect of sensation. This sensation could be called an appellation in which the images signifies its own mode of signification. In this respect, it is also a disciplinary appeal in the sense that the image insists on a certain evaluative quality as a command to behold and a demand to be beheld. In this respect, the image follows the question "what is one to see in this?" Frisch, however, turns this gesture into a memento, in which the helmet substitutes for the hundreds of faces that have turned into one skull.

The notion of the "living dead" coming home to the city that is haunted by its spirits is one for which the wandering man will have to stand in as a representative figure and inhabit the space of the city as the embodiment of its ghosts. This conceptual constellation will be confirmed by the film's subsequent narrative, but the complexity of this grid of substitution and displacement is already encapsulated in the visual arrangement of the opening shot. Within such an image composition, the figure of the man thus also takes on an allegorical quality, as a personification of "coming home" within an abstracted field of reference. He becomes the figure that will stand in relation to the absent inscription of the grave and as the point of reference for

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 62: According to Barthes, the third meaning "maintains a state of perpetual erethism, desire not finding issue in that spasm of the signified which normally brings the subject voluptuously back into the peace of nominations." In the associative play with the terms "subject" and "erethism" (by definition an "abnormal irritability or sensitivity of an organ or body part to stimulation") Barthes also brings in a physical dimension; that is, the "subject" in question here is both the grammatical subject and the "subject" of the observer, whose organic sensations are disturbed.

the helmet. But, in turn, his figure will be inscribed through the movement of the camera.<sup>20</sup> Through this opening gesture, the movement of the camera establishes the framework of the film as one that demands to be “read” in its figurations. The demand, however, can neither be reduced to the category of intentional expression nor does it necessarily posit an individual “reader.” It merely indicates that the film’s images will be legible in the sense that they will be “intelligible” because they will subject the viewer to a particular mode of deciphering and thus impose a particular perspective.

This insistence on legibility is reiterated by the next movement of the camera upwards within the same first shot. The man in the picture pauses, turns to his left in a stage-acting movement that shows us his profile, his face, and then defines a full circle until his point-of-view rests at what is to his right. He looks upward. Framed at a Dutch angle, we now see how he examines a large sign advertising a cabaret nightclub. This is the third level of the notion of “homecoming” because it spells out the fact that it is not home and hearth to which the figure is returning. Far from it, instead, it is the familiar space of bawdy entertainment and distraction to which his gaze turns. The invocation of a form of “homecoming” here is therefore also a rhetorical challenge implicitly directed at the audience, which finds itself in the position of reading the sign at the same moment he does. The sign of the nightclub becomes a rhetorical

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<sup>20</sup> The use of camera movement in Staudte’s opening here is so pronounced and made visible to such an extent that it could serve as a preliminary descriptive enactment of Alexandre Astruc’s concept of the *caméra-stylo*, articulated in the journal *L’ecran Française* 144 (March 1948), where Astruc formulates the importance of the camera as an instrument of writing. As Astruc states, since “[t]he fundamental problem of the cinema is how to express thought,” the *caméra-stylo* would enable the cinema to “become a means of expression as supple and subtle as that of written language.” Quoted in David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 441.

question inscribed into the image because it emphatically points to the issue of the validity of the medium film itself.

For Staudte, this was an urgent question, since he had initiated the renewal of the German film industry by writing a petition to the headquarters of the Soviet occupation zone after he had been dismissed by the other occupation forces in Berlin. To encourage the existing “idealism of the most able film artists,” Staudte wrote to the Soviet military commander, it was incumbent that, “given the undeniable political and cultural significance that befits a new German film creation, the impending danger of a fragmentation of the productive forces of film is to be resolutely resisted.”<sup>21</sup> In relation to Staudte’s proclamation of idealism and his insistence on the political importance of film, the issue of the functions of popular entertainment is invoked through the appearance of the sign. Is this “cheap, base, or even prurient entertainment” for its own sake without any redeeming qualities, the writing asks, or does this constitute, in Frisch’s terms, something that provides a meaning to be discerned from the situation or that is legible in the image?

Because of the German cinema’s long-standing association with prurience and a perceived absence of any redeeming cultural value, with a tedious debate surrounding these concerns going back as far as early Wilhelmine cinema, as well as the problematic of the abuse of the medium by the Nazis, the situation Staudte configures here is also a form of “homecoming” for the audience, so that the implications heralded by the sign here indicate the extent to which the film signals the faith in its own audience’s return to the movie screen as the

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<sup>21</sup> Wolfgang Staudte, “Letter to the Soviet Central Command,” October 9, 1945, reprinted in *Das Jahr 1945: Filme aus Fünfzehn Ländern*, ed. Hans Helmut Prinzler (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1990), pp. 104 – 105.

(Translation mine.)

location where such problems will be posed and addressed. In fact, this faith seems to conform to what Ursula Fries has noted in regard to the miraculous popularity of theater performances in the immediate post-war year, namely that “[c]ulture was one of the few field of activity which was not blocked for Germans – and it was one of the few goods that was not rationed.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the return “arrival” of the cinema as a medium which is aptly suited to interrogate the problematics of the image is at once asserted and celebrated in the first shot and the sign of the cabaret club affirms the importance of properly “reading” the sign and its inherent meaning.

There is, however, a peculiar dynamic in this image of homecoming once it is extended to entail the questions of exile, as an invocation of the question of where this figure comes from; of home, as in to what is he returning; and, finally, of continuity, as in where does he belong. While the image of the ruined city around him certainly suggests a new beginning at a decisive moment of irreversible devastation, often described in the years to come as a *Nullpunkt* or *Kahlschlag* (“point zero” or “clean slate”), the wandering figure belongs in and to the landscape, but at the same time is alien within it as a man. The playing children are certainly more at ease in their environment. In this sense, the appearance of the male figure also emblemizes the notorious debate surrounding the question of exile over and against the choice of “inner emigration,” which was staged in the summer of 1945 in the “Allied-controlled radio stations and in the newly founded newspapers,”<sup>23</sup> and which was vividly encapsulated by the diary entries of the art critic and diplomat Wilhelm Hausenstein, published in 1967, in his *Licht unter*

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<sup>22</sup> Ursula Fries, “West German Theatre in the Period of Reconstruction,” in *The Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought, and Film, 1945 – 50*, ed. Nicholas Hewitt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 210.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Helmut Peitsch, “German Literature in 1945: Liberation for a New Beginning?” in Nicholas Hewitt, ed., *The Culture of Reconstruction*, p. 175.

*dem Horizont: Tagebücher 1942 – 1946*. In a number of these entries, Hausenstein articulates a soon-to-be familiar charge against those intellectuals who left or were forced to leave Germany, namely that in opposition to

“running away from a situation... there was surely something worthwhile in striving for twelve years ... to preserve the purity of goodness for its own sake, and in such a style as though Hitler and his scoundrels didn’t even exist, despite the danger.”<sup>24</sup>

Since this encapsulates very effectively a form of entitlement in which the futile endurance of ordinary life becomes an ennobling act, this issue of the recollection of the immediate past which confers a sense of moral nobility onto the survivors is also suggested by the male figure in the ruins who contemplates the sign. That is, the image of incongruity of the sign in relation to its environment of ruins emphasizes a larger concept of continuing endurance. Moreover, the focus on the sign amplifies the notion of legibility introduced in the camera movements prior to the actual written text to affirm that the perspective of reading the image becomes “accurate.” As an opening shot and a visual introduction to the film, this indicates a remarkable exercise in the disciplinary adjustment that is imposed on the spectator and implicit in the filmic image itself at the same time. Even though it is still broad daylight outside, the entrance to the establishment is bustling with activity, while upbeat but feverish piano music has been playing continuously on the soundtrack, having arisen out of the ominous sound of the gong that accompanied the opening intertitle. The club’s advertisement reads, underneath a name that is not discernible but includes the quirky use of the rare letter “q,” “Das moderne Kabaret: Tanz – Stimmung – Humor” (“the modern cabaret: dance – joyous atmosphere – humor”).

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<sup>24</sup> Wilhelm Hausenstein, diary entry May 15, 1945, quoted in *ibid*.

With this, a fourth level of a “return home” to the familiar is established by alluding to the commonsensical cliché that in a time of death there is a concomitant time of a macabre will to ignorance, the ubiquity of which can here be imagined as a literal dance on the graves. Moreover, the familiar nod of this particular recognition accompanies the image of *plus ça change*, since it posits that a form of decadent self-destruction or self-obliteration, of celebrating “under the volcano” as it were, is still present all around, albeit waiting to be named, “nominated,” that is, and accused through an open acknowledgement of the situation as posited by the image. The man ponders the sign, pauses, turns full circle, and begins to walk as he is drawn inexorably to the club’s entrance. To emphasize the importance of legibility, the camera focuses on the canted position of the sign which lingers onscreen as a slow dissolve finally merges it with the second shot, a low-angle image of an overcrowded train that is carrying a large mass of refugees and displaced persons, all clinging to whatever grip or spot they have been able to find on the engine and wagons.

The words “dance, atmosphere, humor” as both the nominative and the accusative caption for the images remain inscribed diagonally across the screen in a trace as the train moves below them before they gradually fade out and in their lingering presence on the screen reverberate in their appearance of significance. The movement of the train and the mass of anonymous crowds in transition is continued in an oblique reverse shot, which now shows the movement from the perspective of the passengers atop the train engine’s roof as they absorb the sight of destruction below them along the way, “reading” and acknowledging the ruins as they are offered up for inspection and contemplation as part of the inexorable movement forward



along the train tracks, in exactly the same manner that the words of the cabaret sign and the figuration of the first shot have been offered up for legibility.<sup>25</sup>

Few commentators have failed to notice the Expressionist quality of the referential image composition, in which the jagged edges and tilted frames seem to comment on the situation in which the characters find themselves in the film and which seem to evoke deliberately a recuperated tradition of pre-Nazi cinema, as if the history of images might be as easily compartmentalized in such a manner of continuity. This question of a return notwithstanding, the opening shots are so deliberately disciplinary in their insistence on legibility that the efforts suggest an attempted recuperation from a form of visual aphasia by its vernacular use of familiar images of expression.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the general notion of Expressionism as a visual style of externalized subjectivity reinforces this use as another deliberate instance of linkage. Lotte Eisner, in her introduction to German Expressionism that serves as the entry to the argument she elaborates in *The Haunted Screen*, explains that Expressionism is first and foremost a mysticized conceptualization of the relation between the individual and the world. In Expressionism, man, she writes, “commits himself to his impulses,” so that “[t]he ‘world-image’ is reflected in its primitive purity; reality is created by him and the ‘world-image’ exists solely in him.”<sup>27</sup> As a result of these impulses, a “total extravasation of self”<sup>28</sup> takes place, which spills

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<sup>25</sup> And, of course, once again indicating the conceptual proximity of the train to the medium cinema.

<sup>26</sup> This is not to suggest a radical return to Expressionist motifs, but rather serves to emphasize a familiar visual register for the viewer, since the cinema of the Third Reich employed such expressionist visual points of reference as well (and not infrequently at that), albeit in these instances merely as a visual tactic and without a coherent artistic framework.

<sup>27</sup> Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (1952; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 11.

over into a systematic realm of ideology and didacticism, because, in a peculiar German tendency, she observes, “every manifestation in art is immediately transformed into dogma.”<sup>29</sup> In this fusion of self into world and, vice versa, world as crystallized through the self, “mind has the mission of giving form to matter.”<sup>30</sup> From this intellectual artistic lineage, Eisner asserts, stems the pervasive atmosphere of German cinema where “exterior facts are continually being transformed into interior elements and psychic events are exteriorized.”

Certainly, the study of the cinema has long centered on such extravasations and how the dissolution of the boundaries between self and image might be understood methodologically, but in this case it does not follow that to designate this as an expressionist instance would mean to invoke a term of obfuscation rather than clarification. Expressionism as a filmic category seems to have outlived its usefulness as an epochal classification and Eisner herself has recently been said to use the “label of expressionism” in discussing particular exemplary films of the most famous directors of Weimar Germany as a retrospective attempt for coherence, that is, as a means to “project onto their work” a pervasive mode merely “for the sake of constructing a coherent framework for the discussion of Weimar cinema.”<sup>31</sup> But as precarious as the term is may be, Thomas Elsaesser provides a significant link to the function of the phenomenon of expressionism in *Murderers are Among Us*, since, as he insists, one of the primary goals of the

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Eisner’s use of the term “world-image” is in reference to the novelist and art theoretician Kasimir Edschmid (1890 – 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Scheunemann, “Activating the Differences: Expressionist Film and Early Weimar Cinema,” in *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), p. 7.

term *expressionist cinema* “was a self-conscious attempt at wooing a bourgeois public, and meant to persuade the middle classes to accept the cinema as a legitimate art.”<sup>32</sup> In another moment of linkage, then, the film here again invokes the question of the legitimacy of its own use of images while at the same time inscribing this issue into a visibly dramatic expression of writing.

More productive than outlining an aesthetic sense of continuity, therefore, is a focus on the figurations that the opening sequence inscribes. From the elaborate geometric construction of the letters of the sign merging with the movement of the train in the dissolve, the vector of movement is continued as the train moves into the shelled ruins of the Stettiner train station in Berlin, where the camera begins to single out and follow a female face in the crowd of the disembarking passengers. This, we will learn, is Susanne Wallner, played by Hildegard Knef, who is returning home from a concentration camp and who will find the disillusioned Mertens squatting in her old apartment. Even at this point, with only six consecutive separate shots at four minutes into the film, the camera has not yet been completely level and the perspective we see is slightly tilted to the left as if the heavy luggage she is carrying informs our point-of-view as well and fuses once more the viewer’s perspective with that of the protagonist within the image. A point-of-view shot now reveals her perspective as she is walking towards a corner of the train station where people are waiting. By this point the shot sequence has established three separate movements that nonetheless emphasize their similarity as a particular trajectory of movement. The wandering gaze of the two figures has been replicated in the motion of the camera and now merges completely with that of the spectator.

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Weimar Cinema, Mobile Selves, and Anxious Males: Kracauer and Eisner Revisited,” in *Expressionist Films*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann, p. 43.

This consolidation of movement works in accordance with what Gilles Deleuze has located for the cinema at this specific point in time, namely a moment at which movement “subordinates description of a space to the functions of thought.”<sup>33</sup> Deleuze continues that this constitutes a “camera-consciousness... defined... by the mental connections it is able to enter into.”<sup>34</sup> However, in contrast to the emerging practice of neo-realism in the same period, the vectors that are described by the movement in the opening sequence are in service of a specific configuration and are driven by a disciplinary compulsion. That is, in contrast, to a “lacunary reality”<sup>35</sup> that Deleuze identifies for neorealist cinema, in which “there is no longer a vector or line of the universe which extends and links up the events,”<sup>36</sup> the sequential arrangement of the shots is organized around a particular perspective. Like the cabaret sign, this perspective follows the gaze toward an instance of writing in an emphatic logic of movement that is punctuated by writing. Through its immediate proximity following the inscription of the cabaret’s advertisement as a title into the image of refugees on a train, this second instant of writing establishes a sense of repetition that emphasizes a point being driven “home” as a form of a disciplinary condition of viewing. In this sense, the image already emblemizes a sense of moral indignation since it encapsulates the gesture of furnishing evidence as a testimony. That is, it testifies to the demand to see and witness and, within a rhetorical register, the image thus already

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<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 212.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

anticipates the plea made during the blockade of Berlin to “look at” what has happened to this city.<sup>37</sup>

In her analysis of the “images of society” in the German cinema from 1945 to 1949, Bettina Greffrath suggests that the opening sequence deploys two different conceptions of homecoming, one she terms a “successful homecoming” while she labels the other “one that has not been completed.”<sup>38</sup> Greffrath does seem to notice the fact that both instances of movement culminate with the emergence of writing, although she misidentifies the sign that Mertens reads as one that states “Bar” and not one that reads “the modern cabaret.” She takes this to mean that in his intoxicated state Mertens stumbles toward the “bar” as a goal and that “his gaze does not *recognizably* perceive his environment.”<sup>39</sup> Greffrath therefore identifies the issue of perception at work in the sequence and sees this as a matter of defining the relative value of divergent modes of recognition, but she does not follow through with the implications of this insight. In contemporary reviews of the film as well, this opening shot was memorable enough to be mentioned in a significant number of cases and the locale was twice identified with the term *Bumslokal*, a slang expression that technically means “dance-hall dive” but which could also

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<sup>37</sup> At the height of the Berlin blockade in September 1948, the mayor of the Western sectors of the city, Ernst Reuter, appealed to the “eyes” of the world by pleading “you peoples of the world, look at this city” (“Ihr Völker der Welt, schaut auf diese Stadt!”) in a famous speech he gave in front of the ruins of the Reichstag.

<sup>38</sup> Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit: Deutsche Spielfilme 1945 - 1949* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlag, 1995), pp. 198 – 199. In the original, “eine geglückte Heimkehr” as opposed to “eine nicht zu Ende gekommene Heimkehr.”

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198. Emphasis in original.

connote a brothel in this context.<sup>40</sup> The reviewer of the Berlin newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* even went as far as to attest to this scene an “astonishing optical suction capacity,”<sup>41</sup> which, while unfortunate as a metaphor in either English or German, does emphasize the compelling disciplinary force at work here.

This notion of force is replicated in the following sequence that Greffrath claims is indicative of a “successful” homecoming. For Greffrath, Susanne, in contrast to Mertens, is at this point endowed with a capacity for perception because she “*sees* with astonished, wide-open eyes people who have been bowed: casualties of war, refugees.”<sup>42</sup> While this description seems like a rather unusual moment of astonishment for someone who is returning from a concentration camp, Greffrath does register Susanne’s view, which notices a poster “recalling an idyllic country scene.” This assessment is inaccurate and minimizes the importance of the sequence, especially because, as Greffrath herself seems to indicate, it occurs as a direct repetition of the category of perception by reading the writing on the screen again. What Susanne sees is a wounded soldier hobbling on crutches whose coat bears the large letters “PW” for “prisoner of

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<sup>40</sup> The cultural archive or *Kulturarchiv* of the Fachhochschule Hannover, in conjunction with the History Department of the University of Hannover, has made a number of documents and archival materials relating to the film available online, including fifteen contemporary reviews of the film. They can be found at [http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen\\_spielfilme/filme/moerder/kritik.htm](http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen_spielfilme/filme/moerder/kritik.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. In his review “Der erste deutsche Film nach dem Kriege,” in *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 16, 1945, Friedrich Luft calls the film’s opening shot one “mit erstaunlicher optischer Saugkraft.” Most of the other reviews available in the online *Kulturarchiv* are equally positive to enthusiastic, with specific mentions of the use of the camera and the set design, but the important exception is a critical review by Wolfdietrich Schnurre, who bemoans the film’s predilection for heavy-handed symbolism and reworks the passive construction of the film’s title by asserting that “murderers are among us? We are murderers.”

<sup>42</sup> Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit*, p. 199. Emphasis in original.

war” that are stenciled on his back. If both sequences that comprise the opening of the film are structured around the category of a homecoming, which is epitomized by the act of reading signs, then the image of a man with a mark on his back suggests another sense of return, namely a deliberate return to the visual mode of signification in the film *M*.

Robert Shandley notes that “[b]oth narratively and stylistically, the film vaguely echoes Fritz Lang’s *M*, a similar story of shell-shock, murder, and revenge in an anxiety-ridden Berlin.”<sup>43</sup> But Shandley is more interested in examining the generic and narrative codes of the film, which to him suggest that the film is a “Western” since in “its presentation of the landscape, the hero, the heroine, and much of the plot, it echoes the filmic codes of the American Western,”<sup>44</sup> an assessment he shares with Greffrath, who remarks that in the film “the movements of people in hiding are easily reminiscent of chase sequences in boundless mountainous terrain for the connoisseur of Western movies.”<sup>45</sup> Both Shandley and Greffrath focus on the echoes and moments of reminiscence that the film enlists, but it seems that the visual linkage to *M* is more than just a cinematic allusion or a visual echo. In this respect, the film’s opening also establishes a “homecoming” or return to the issue of the mark as it functioned in *M*. What is remarkable is that the image of the mark now serves a badge of victimhood which is no longer defined by the relation of the outsider to a group that determines the status of exclusion, but rather asserted as an all-encompassing, existential condition of being.

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<sup>43</sup> Robert R. Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit*, p. 218. In the original, Greffrath emphasizes the chaotic and incalculable terrain of the ruins as the visual equivalent of the desert and mountains in the Western film.

The point-of-view of Susanne is one of dislocation in the sense that she arrives at a place that seems no longer familiar to her. From this perspective, she is surrounded by people who are equally displaced from their environments. Moreover, the recognition of the mark “PW” that is on display on the person hobbling in front of her confers the status of the mark onto the entire group, since the arrival hall in which everyone is waiting is a shared communal space in which people are individuated as victims, that is, old men, women, children, and the wounded. In other words, there are only victims that have been displaced and now carry the mark to indicate their state of being displaced. The figure of exclusion from *M* has now been rearticulated as a figure of communal or shared displacement. The reemergence of the mark exemplifies that everyone now lives under the sign and is held captive by it: Mertens is held captive by the alienating spell of the cabaret sign and Susanne and her fellow-travelers by the circumstances of war; that is, they have all been subjected to and thus marked by the condition of war. In this respect, the displaced figure of *M* has now been inverted and transferred to indicate a sense of suffering in which everyone is included.

Staudte must have placed an insistent emphasis on the proper staging of this particular sequence, which is evident from an awkward moment of movement that precipitates the revelation of the writing on the poster and confirms the significance of the writing in the image. As the wounded prisoner-of-war turns his back towards the camera, which is still moving in a tracking point-of-view shot towards the remnants of the wall of the arrival hall, an old man standing in front of the wall begins to move but then hesitates and returns to his initial position for the cue he has been instructed to follow. The old man waits until the soldier has fully faced forward towards him so that the writing on his back has become visible and legible for the spectator before the old man moves again and leaves his position as Staudte had envisioned. The



soldier then takes over his position and stands in the old man's place. This brief instance of performative hesitation, in which the awkward movement of the actor breaks up the fluidity of motion as a kind of gestural stutter, indicates the elaborately staged choreography of displacement that Staudte envisioned for the shot and enacts a violation of what James Naremore has termed a theatrical "protocol" of performance in which acting should be regarded as "an artful imitation of unmediated behavior in the real world."<sup>46</sup> The old man must wait until the soldier has turned his back fully towards the camera and sits down at the exact spot where the old man has been standing before, while the old man now turns his back and looks out through an open hole in the wall that used to be a window. Both figures are now on either side of a poster that the old man has partially obscured and the camera, still moving, begins to frame the poster in its center. It is a tourism poster advertising "das schöne Deutschland" or "beautiful Germany."

The image in the poster does not show a country landscape, as Greffrath asserts, nor does it depict the city of Nürnberg, as Shandley claims, but shows, in fact, the market square with its fountain and the council hall of the town of Wernigerode.<sup>47</sup> Underneath this quintessential image

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<sup>46</sup> James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Shandley in his *Rubble Films*, p. 31, identifies the location as Nürnberg, but this is not self-evident from the image in the poster, and Greffrath does not seem to recollect the image at all. My assessment is that the poster is a photograph of the medieval city hall or *Rathaus* and the market square of Wernigerode in Saxony-Anhalt. A speculative association of the image with Nuremberg, however, is certainly interesting since the phrase "das schöne Deutschland" could evoke the name of a fountain in Nuremberg, "der schöne Brunnen," while the two steeples on the half-timbered building might possibly evoke the two towers of the St. Sebald Church in Nuremberg near the fountain. An allusion to the city Nuremberg would also be particularly poignant, given that the film had its premiere in Berlin on October 15, 1946, coinciding with the conclusion of the 11-month Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. Verdicts had been delivered on October 1, 1946, and all the

of an idyllic notion of an anachronistic home, that is, a “hometown” for which the geographic and imaginary center is the provincial town square anchored by the town hall, a half-timbered building with steeples, and its meeting point at the quaint fountain, the caption advertises the historical beauty of Germany. The camera tracks in on the poster hanging crookedly and out-of-place on the bare wall while the old man begins to rest his head next to it in exhaustion as he looks out of the gaping hole in the wall. His position has been replaced by the soldier who is resting as well. The writing that declares Germany to be beautiful is now in full unobstructed view. As the camera moves towards the poster’s anachronistic depiction of small-town order and beauty, the image dissolves into a long shot where the steeples of the tourism poster are replaced by ruins of foreboding towers that reach into the clouds like apocalyptic stalagmites.

Within the confrontation staged between the writing that asserts Germany’s timeless and inviting provincial beauty and the abstracted and monstrous ruins that seem to grow into the vast sky, the linkages established in this sequence point to an existential and thus an a-historical condition to which the protagonists have been made subservient. This condition is created through a doubling effect of alienation and refamiliarization, whereby a sense of victimhood is inscribed and then recognized. However, to confirm this effect, the condition is made legible in the characters’ relation to the signs that they perceive. This function would correspond to what Sabine Hake has diagnosed as a general aspect of postwar German cinema, namely that it is takes on a “position of depoliticised humanism that, often with an existentialist bent,

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appeals had been rejected by October 13. The death sentences were carried out October 16, 1946, so that Hermann Göring’s suicide on the eve of his execution coincides with the premiere of the film. Nonetheless, both critical assessments misidentify the image, so that the invocation of the loss that is expressed by the use of the poster is reenacted on a secondary level, namely that the former “beauty of Germany” can no longer be identified and thus no longer preserved as a record.

characterised most later representations of the Third Reich and its postwar legacies.”<sup>48</sup> In this case, however, the a-historical condition that the film proposes is nonetheless grounded in a particular understanding of the figural history of images. Moreover, the sequence replicates a notion of authority that derives its claims to legitimacy from a seemingly timeless shift to allegorization. With the use of the two instances of writing, Staudte thus manages to configure the film as one which imposes an act of reading signs, while at the same time invoking the mechanism of social control that structured the film *M*. Since this linkage transposes the social conflict of *M* into the realm of a Berlin in ruins, it reverses the exclusionary power of the mark as an inclusive condition of suffering and, at the same time, suggests the importance of reading the signs as a disciplinary imposition which will determine the proper subject position in relation to the writing.

Through this opening sequence we are introduced to the two protagonists of the film. Both are in the process of returning home to a place that they will have to share. Susanne Wallner, who has been imprisoned in a concentration camp for three years, will get to know Dr. Hans Mertens, who has been squatting in her apartment. He is a former surgeon and soldier now turned cynic and wallowing in self-pity, but she will fall in love with him and help him overcome his traumas. As we can deduce from the gossip of their neighbors, Mertens has long been in the habit of returning home drunk from his daily and nightly outings. Upon her arrival Susanne first visits her neighbor, Herr Mondschein, a kindly old man with an optician’s store on the ground floor of the building. By this time it has become evening. The focus at the conclusion of this introductory sequence, in conjunction with the movement of the camera, on the issue of camera framing emphasizes the importance of perspective. The transitions through dissolves are

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<sup>48</sup> Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 91.

composed in a manner that is predicated on an oblique and fragmented logic of linkages as geometric similarities from the images to the ruined environment that surrounds them, so that a fragmentary pattern in one image becomes the connecting figure to the subsequent image. The movement from the opening intertitle to the vision charts thus attempts to inscribe an act of displacement in working through from monumentalism towards the human scale.

The transitory displacement is initiated in the first dissolve from the entrance gates to the nightclub that yield to the shape of a locomotive driving through them while the writing above the doors remains the anchor that grounds both images in the frame that has been defined by the writing. Finally, the vectoral movement of the opening sequence begins with the arrival of the train and continued through Susanne's walk among the ruined steeples comes to rest with the image of shadows cast through the railing of the steps of Susanne's home. With this trajectory, the opening images replicate the fragmentation and dislocation that literalize a world out of balance and without footing, yet each shot becomes a movement that searches for the proper frame which will put the images into their required perspective. Staudte's attention to this notion of framing the individual within the image here is so prominent that it rivals the later melodramatic work of Douglas Sirk. Moreover, the attention to framing relies on a conjunction between the categorical principle of Expressionism, by which tormented inner states of being are rendered as outward reality, and its melodramatic variant, which emphasizes the *mise-en-scène* as an articulation of the individual in relation to the constraints of the social order.

In this case, Staudte integrates both approaches in order to arrive at a level whereby the relation of the individual to the image overall conveys the loss of balance on the one hand while at the same time emphasizing the imposition of larger impersonal forces that render the individual trapped in circumstances. Thus, when Susanne reaches her old home after her journey

from the camps on the train into the ruined city, she sees herself reflected in the fragments of a shattered mirror that is part of the optician's store window. At this point the camera positions have finally shifted from the extreme canted and high- or low-angled perspectives that structured the opening sequence to a level point-of-view and now come to rest. The moment of an anchoring perspective has arrived when she sees her own reflection. This moment of assessment is repeated in the scene following immediately thereafter when Mondschein looks up from working on a pair of glasses because he notices Susanne, who has entered his store and has moved to its corner in front of two lettered posters designed to test visual acuity.<sup>49</sup> As he looks at her in front of these Snellen Charts, his puzzled looks turns to a smile.

The shift in perspective is accompanied by a sleight of hand in the production design. In order to frame Susanne accurately between the two charts behind her in the reverse shot, the arrangement of the posters has been altered so that she is flanked on either side by the letters and patterns of the chart as if to be examined closely. Of course this change can be considered as a mere marginal divergence from a particular standard of artificial filmic continuity, but, once again, the divergence underscores Staudte's attention to detail that the film imposes even in such lesser noticeable arrangements of the *mise-en-scène*.<sup>50</sup> This meticulous arrangement, then,

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<sup>49</sup> For a film that has often only been discussed in terms of its heavy-handedness and pathos, Staudte demonstrates a remarkable sense of visual wit and compositional elegance here.

<sup>50</sup> Staudte's attention to detail was such that he sought to reconstruct the ruins of Berlin in the studio in order "to create the perfect rubble," as Shandley states. Cf. Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films*, p. 37. Marc Silberman, however, notes that Staudte had begun shooting newsreel documentaries in the Fall of 1945 and that some of these sequences were incorporated into the film as well as into his later film *Rotation*. Cf. Marc Silberman, "Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (1949)," in *Widergänger: Faschismus und Antifaschismus im Film*, ed. Joachim Schmitt-Sasse (Münster: MAkS Publikationen, 1993), p. 138.

continues the mode of evaluation the film has introduced with its first shot, in which the camera provides us with reference points that indicate how the film imagines itself as a framework and guideline for the issue of judgment.

This sense of framing is fundamental to the film in a way that the more easily recognizable formal correspondences to the aesthetic of Expressionism do not address. While the angular constructions of the opening shot sequence suggest similarities with the aesthetic principles of German Expressionism, a similarity that is often evoked as a short-hand for the film's aesthetic continuity as opposed to the caesura that the terms "zero hour" or "year zero" would imply, the juxtaposition of writing into the image suggests a more explicit reference to a culture of the recent past. The act of invoking the cabaret nightclub and its attendant shorthand for a brothel as site of depravity conveys a sentiment often associated with Weimar nightlife, namely the willful and forceful insistence on entertainment as a desire to block out and momentarily escape the harsh realities or the confinement of social conditions. Given that the cinema as mode of entertainment is understood to cater to this very desire, the moment fulfills a complicated maneuver of reflexivity. The sign in the image that announces a site of distraction into the joys and pleasures of a cabaret spectacle serves as a signal to indicate a disciplinary conflict.

In all of these figural linkages, the logic of the image sequence follows a rigidly organized line of argument, in which even the seemingly elliptical dissolves are imposed by a coherence. This coherence has the appearance of being driven by a visual geometry, but it is, in fact, a logic of figuration. If *Murderers Are Among Us* is discussed in terms of its similarity to neo-realism, which Shandley suggests when he states that the film "can also be contextualized

with Italian neo-realism,”<sup>51</sup> or when Anton Kaes states that the film evinces Staudte’s stylistic choices with “elements that recall Italian neorealism,”<sup>52</sup> then this indicates more of a desire than an accurate definition. Thomas Brandlmeier cites the influential German film critic Enno Patalas, whose 1961 assessment on the post-war opportunities already mentions a general desire for the promise “that, right after the war, the German cinema suggested that it had what it took for achieving something similar to Italian neo-realism.”<sup>53</sup> While there may have understandably been a predilection to assume in the first decade after the war that German cinema had the capacity to engage in new conceptions of “realism,” this runs counter to the analysis in which Gilles Deleuze demonstrates the radical break that neo-realism introduced in the history of the cinema, since it is defined by a “build-up of purely optical situations... which are fundamentally distinct from the sensory-motor situations of the action-image in the old realism.”<sup>54</sup>

While the opening sequence of the film might suggest a succession of existential or “purely optical” situations, its mode of figuration in fact links back to very classical schemata. Thomas Brandlmeier comes to this conclusion as well by way of an analysis of the film’s symbolic and imaginary concepts when he dismisses critics who suggest an affinity between rubble films and neo-realism by declaring that the German cinema “uses rubbles for a German

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films*, p. 28. He does note that the film’s location shots were highly stylized and the set designs elaborately constructed.

<sup>52</sup> Anton Kaes, *From Hitler To Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Enno Patalas, “In Jenen Tagen,” in *Filmkritik* 3 (1961), cited in Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” in *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946 – 1962*, ed. Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 2.

subjectivity and a constructed cinema of ideas”<sup>55</sup> and he stages a diametrical opposition between the two cinemas for which he concludes that “while the emblematic image of neoverism refers to contemporaneity, the symbolic images of the rubble film refer to the deep, the hidden, the past, the buried.”<sup>56</sup> Heide Fehrenbach reaches this insight from a different direction through a narrative analysis in which she summarizes the film as a chronicle of a “spiritual suffering” experienced by a protagonist who is trapped in time; that is, since he is “imprisoned by memories of the past,” he is “unable to confront the present.”<sup>57</sup> In both cases, she suggests, the emphasis lies on the question of the return, but it is not exactly clear how this “return” needs to be conceptualized.

Fehrenbach, for example, supports her assessment of the film as a confrontation between “successful” and “unsuccessful returns” through an extensive citation of Eric Rentschler’s summary of the film, which, as he argues,

“thematizes the relationship between the past and the present: the camera fixes on a grave, rising to gaze out a long lane where Mertens, the dazed physician... staggers toward the mound and a group of playing children. Framed by the specter of war’s devastation, but surrounded by youth and hopes for the future, Mertens will take flight into a bar from which honky-tonk music issues. His persistent outings into night clubs are an escape from the past and a postponement of the future, a step into a realm of excitement and gaiety where time is of little importance. Pursued by the recollection of a massacre he sought to prevent while in Poland, the physician cannot recycle

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” in Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert, eds., *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, p. 34. (Translation mine.)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 204.



the past with the ease of his ex-superior Brückner, the man responsible for the killings who has in the meanwhile settled into a smug and comfortable existence as head of a factory where steel helmets are made into pots and pans.”<sup>58</sup>

In his customarily succinct summary, Rentschler identifies a range of important instances that define the film’s conflicted notion of history that will extend to the 1949 film *Rotation*, another one of Staudte’s works to reflect on recent German history. As Rentschler defines it, the film outlines two divergent experiences of time, namely one which seeks refuge in an eternal present in order to avoid a confrontation with trauma, while the other follows a linear conception in which progress is defined as the ability for replacement, an ability which is suggested by Brückner’s name as one who can effortlessly build a “bridge” from one position to another in the way he conforms to a new era through a grotesque version of turning swords into plowshares. Rentschler already invokes a third relation to history as a cyclical figure of rotation since he discusses the ability to “recycle” in his use of the term. In both Fehrenbach’s and Rentschler’s assessments, however, the focus remains on a discursive notion from the Adenauer years through a term deployed in public by the first West German president Theodor Heuss, namely *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that is, the ability to leave the past behind in an act of surmounting it or a “coming to terms with the past,” which, as Anton Kaes states, was part of a general discourse that “fostered the growing view, strongly held in the 1950s, that the past should be laid to rest.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Fehrenbach, pp. 204 – 205. From Eric Rentschler, “Germany: The Past That Would Not Go Away,” in *World Cinema since 1945*, ed. William Luhr (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1987), p. 211.

<sup>59</sup> Anton Kaes, *From Hitler To Heimat*, p. 17.

Because the film culminates in a confrontation between Mertens, who is determined to avenge the crimes he was forced to commit during the war, and Brückner, his commanding officer and the “murderer among” the protagonists, played by Arno Paulsen, the narrative resolution for the threat of this confrontation has invited frequent charges that the film exonerates personal responsibility in favor of a conception of justice which implies a functioning system of the state. Susanne intervenes at the last moment to stop Mertens from killing Brückner with a memorable declaration that moves the demand for justice into the realm of the state and thus displaces individual action into to realm of an abstract system of justice in the same manner that *M* culminated in the intervention of the state. Likewise, in both *M* and *Murderers Are Among Us*, the final images depict this resolution through a process of allegorization that ultimately does not provide a solution but rather indicates the impossibility of finding the proper mode of representation and demonstrates the difficulty of halting or “arresting” the dynamic of the implications that have been invoked.

In both instances, a plaintive appeal to the state as the final authoritative arbiter of judgment is made, so that the figure of justice in *M* is allegorized in the faces of the lamenting mothers, in whose name justice has supposedly been served, while in *Murderers Are Among Us* the final sequence shows Brückner, behind bars proclaiming his innocence, upon which first the image of a mother with her two children and then the stoic faces of an older man and a young boy are superimposed. Both are in uniform, and the old man’s wide-open eyes are staring into one direction, while the young boy’s eyes are pointed in the opposite direction, blindly, since he is wearing dark glasses. Row after row of crosses that mark innumerable graves are

superimposed onto their silent, accusing stares.<sup>60</sup> A geometrical and moving pattern of these crosses takes over and animates the image, until the pattern comes to rest and lingers on three crosses arranged like the depiction of the crucifixion on Calvary with the cross of Jesus in the middle and next to it the two smaller crosses of Dismas and Gestas, the apocryphal names of the malefactors crucified on either side of him. The camera closes in on the middle cross as the image gradually fades out and the outstretched arms of the middle cross come closer until they seem to embrace the entire screen while it goes dark, with the faint cries of “but I am innocent” still audible.

For a film commissioned in the Soviet zone, whose cultural officer insisted on a change in the ending that removed the suggestion of vigilante justice by informing Staudte that, the justifiable narrative desire for revenge notwithstanding, “when the people leave the theater, there’ll be all sorts of gun-cracking on the streets and we can’t have that, obviously,”<sup>61</sup> this determined shift toward Christian iconography is certainly noteworthy.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>60</sup> This iconic configuration is therefore very much in line with the allegorization of the face of sacrifice at the conclusion of *Ohm Krüger*.

<sup>61</sup> As quoted in Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” p. 39. In the original: “Wenn der Film ein Erfolg ist, und die Leute kommen aus dem Kino, dann gibt es Geknalle auf der Straße, und das kommt natürlich nicht infrage.”

<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, the conflation here of Christian iconography with totalitarian modes of representation under Soviet cultural control might be less contradictory than it seems, since a large number of Nazi films at the time were in the process of being shipped to the Soviet Union, where they served to augment domestic film production and were often shown to Soviet audiences with minimal modifications. *Ohm Krüger* was part of a vast number of these “booty films” that were captured from the archives by the Soviet Army during and after World War II and which “were thrown into Soviet distribution on a mass scale, without subtitles and often under different names.” Cf. Maya

abstracted iconic configuration of sacrifice and sin comes after a declaration of Susanne, who implores Mertens that “we do not have the right to judge.” To this Mertens accedes and responds, “You are right, Susanne. But it is our duty to raise indictments, to demand atonement on behalf of millions of innocent people murdered callously.”<sup>63</sup> Given the significance of this resolution, it is remarkable how loosely and cavalierly the intervention of Susanne and Mertens’ final statement in response are represented as pontifications in both the discussions of Shandley and Kaes. Shandley declares that Susanne’s “final statement, that ‘we don’t have the right to be judge and hangman,’ followed by accession to democratic due process, is clearly integrationist.”<sup>64</sup> He continues by stating that this is an example of the “film’s more enigmatic elements,” which can be explained by the fact that the “generic codes that best suit [Susanne’s] story, namely the domestic melodrama, serve to insert legal discourse into the film.”<sup>65</sup>

Anton Kaes is more assiduous in his description of the film, but nonetheless he also suggests it is Susanne who offers the final declaration, since Kaes states that

“[a]t the end of the film Mertens’s friend, who has herself just been released from a concentration camp, says, ‘We do not have the right to judge, but we have the duty to accuse, to

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Turovskaya, “The 1930s and 1940s: Cinema in Context,” in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> The original dialogue states: “Wir haben nicht das Recht zu richten.” “Nein, Susanne. Aber wir haben die Pflicht, Anklage zu erheben, Sühne zu fordern, im Auftrage von Millionen unschuldig hingemordeter Menschen.”

<sup>64</sup> Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films*, p. 41. This representation is unfortunate, both for its rendition of the tone and of the content of the dialogue.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

demand atonement on behalf of millions of innocent people who were murdered in cold blood.”<sup>66</sup>

Even though Kaes sees the necessity to reproduce the final statement more faithfully than Shandley, his rendition still suggests that it is the concentration camp survivor who speaks on behalf of all of the victims in an act of abdication in which their right to adjudicate is relinquished in favor of a state system that has been notably absent throughout the film. These assessments derive their argument only by foreclosing the evident logic of figural displacement, in which the intervention of Susanne is continued as a vector of force that is first transferred onto Mertens to include him as a victim as well and then extends outward until it reaches everyone in an all-encompassing gesture of inclusion and forgiveness that even hears the pleading voice of the perpetrator while it reaches the limits of the screen to embrace the audience beyond these confines.

While both Kaes and Shandley are correct in understanding the allegorization at work here again as a figural means to incorporate a conception of the state, they assume that the system of state that is imagined here either corresponds to, in Shandley’s terms, a generic necessity that indicates an “integrationist democratic due process” or, as Kaes puts it, corresponds to a dramaturgical conception that fails because it offers an “appeal to the legal system of the state”<sup>67</sup> which is absent from the rest of the film. Even Wolfgang Becker and Norbert Schöll, who go furthest in their ideological critique of the film, see this as a fictitious construction of a moral civic duty, the crisis of which becomes the “touchstone of the new power

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<sup>66</sup> Anton Kaes, *From Hitler To Heimat*, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

of the state.”<sup>68</sup> As Becker and Schöll argue, it is the moral dimension that renders the shift from personal revenge to state power merely an issue of degree rather than a dichotomy. They cite Staudte’s insistence that the Soviet narrative intervention had actually convinced him as an indication that the ending posits the moral position of the citizen, or, in a literal translation of their phrase, the “acceptable state citizen’s thinking,”<sup>69</sup> who voluntarily gives up his desire for revenge and displaces it into the legal order of the state. The sense of irritation that all three assessments register, in fact, indicates the precarious legitimacy of the state which can only presume its authoritative force through the allegorization that the film reaches toward in its conclusion. But the conception of the state that is configured here does not suggest a democratic state, nor does it point to a system that is based on the due process of codified law that is derived from a communal consensus. Rather, it even goes beyond moral or ethical categories since is grounded in the allegorical power of reference which, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, elevates and sanctifies the “profane world” since the nature of allegory, “although a convention like every kind of writing, is regarded as created, like holy scripture.”<sup>70</sup>

This reference points to an absolutist state because it posits the presence of a systemic and sacralized form of justice and this assertion derives its justification from the iconography of its allegorization of judgment as fiat. In this regard, the ending of the film is coherent with the logic that ends the film *M* and the film *Ohm Krüger*. It is precisely not a legal and democratic system, on the basis of which justice becomes possible, that the film offers as a solution, but

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<sup>68</sup> Wolfgang Becker and Norbert Schöll, *In Jenen Tagen...: Wie der Deutsche Nachkriegsfilm die Vergangenheit bewältigte* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1995), p. 41. (Translation mine.)

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. In the original: “Von staatsbürgerlichem Denken her *moralisch zulässig* ist allerdings nur der, der die Rache als Recht und Gesetz einfordert.” (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>70</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), p. 175.

rather a divine state of being that exists outside of temporal contingencies and political limitations as a form of destiny which will absolve the powerless individual of his responsibility to adjudicate and which will become the ultimate guarantor of judgment instead. In this respect, the film aligns itself with *M*, which, while offering the possibility for the intervention of the law, ultimately follows the logic of the legal lack of accountability, or the paragraph 51 with its loophole of the *Unzurechnungsfähigkeit* invoked at the kangaroo trial, to its end and comes to rest on the allegorized faces of motherhood who lament the limitations of justice accorded in the system of law.

This would explain the blithe responses of audience members as described in a review following a screening of the film three years after its original premiere of the film and which might be more intriguing than they appear at first glance. In the *Evangelischer Film-Beobachter*, a recent journal of film criticism that had been established in December 1948 under the auspices of the German protestant church, a resistance to the topic of guilt is noted, which is evident from what the author declares the “vox populi” after the film’s screening. In his 1949 review of the film, “Unsere empfindliche Stelle - Die Mörder sind unter uns,” published in the vol. 1, no. 5, March 1, 1949, issue of the *Evangelischer Film-Beobachter*, the reviewer W.W. is puzzled by the lack of positive responses to the film he overheard at the screening for which he was present. He recounts that a significant number of audience members complained vociferously and derisively about the film afterward, a sentiment that he terms “our sensitive spot” in the title of his review.<sup>71</sup> He provides examples for this sensitivity by making note of such utterances as “this

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<sup>71</sup> The review is reprinted in its original form in Hilmar Hoffmann und Walter Schobert, eds., *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946 – 1962*, p. 255. The review is also available online in the documents and production materials for the film as part of the *Kulturarchiv* established by the Fachhochschule Hannover at

film should be banned,” “a consumer strike against movie theaters should be organized,” “I thought it was going to be a murder mystery film,” or, presumably in response to the question of individual guilt, “this needs to stop already.”<sup>72</sup> In his article, the reviewer sets out to investigate the rationale behind such irreverent and sarcastic remarks and attempts to find an explanation for them.

Remarkably, like Shandley and Kaes, this contemporary and presumably protestant reviewer of the film fails to identify its figural gestures toward Christian iconography in equal measures as well, although his choice of descriptive language suggests that the film may have had a more successful visual impact on him than he himself gives it credit for. It seems that the reviewer did recognize a sense of Christian iconography at work in the film here, but this sentiment only prompts him to develop a line of argument that attempts to find the reasons for the people’s rejection of the film. As W.W. determines, the film remains “stuck in the negative,” so that the “inability to prevail over a sense of guilt [*nicht überwundene Schuldgefühl*] leads to tension and thus to unproductive nihilism.”<sup>73</sup> The conclusion that W.W. derives from this insurmountable inability that must lead to a fruitless or nihilist attitude is worth quoting at length. As he continues, this nihilism

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[http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen\\_spielfilme/filme/moerder/k10.htm](http://www.hist.uni-hannover.de/~kultarch/dnach45/zeitgen_spielfilme/filme/moerder/k10.htm). I have not yet been able to determine who W.W. was, but there is a distinct possibility that the abbreviation stands for Will Wehling, a film journalist who was involved with the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen since its inception in 1954, when it was known as the Westdeutsche Kulturfilmtage, and who later became its executive director from 1971 until his death in 1975.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



“... cannot be solved by a renewed guilt. This might also be why this film, after all, has two endings – and neither is a solution. After all, human guilt is only recognized in the face of God – and can only be forgiven at the Cross of Golgotha. The fact that this film does not dare to thrust forward into the religious sphere is its weakness. If it had extended itself into this chastening crisis, it would hardly have encountered such strongly dismissive judgment from the vox populi.”<sup>74</sup>

This analysis is significant for its laudable effort to locate the origins of the blithely insouciant to cynical responses of the audience members, for its insistent reversal of cause and effect, and for its attempts to find the motivations and original intentions at the heart of such sentiments in precisely the wrong place, “after all,” to use the phrase of the reviewer, since he begins with the question “vox populi – vox dei?”<sup>75</sup> There is an interesting displacement at work

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. In the original: “Aber er [der Film] bleibt im Negativen stecken. Das nicht überwundene Schuldgefühl führt zur Verkrampfung und damit zum unfruchtbaren Nihilismus. Er kann nicht durch neue Schuld gelöst werden. Daher kommt es wohl auch, daß dieser Film im Grunde zwei Schlüsse hat – und beide sind keine Lösung. Menschliche Schuld wird im Grunde nur vor dem Angesicht Gottes erkannt – und kann nur am Kreuze von Golgotha vergeben werden. Daß dieser Film den Vorstoß in die religiöse Sphäre nicht wagt, ist seine Schwäche. Hätte er in diese läuternde Krisis hineingeführt, dann hätte er wohl kaum dieses ablehnende Urteil der vox populi gefunden.”

<sup>75</sup> I.e. “The voice of the people, the voice of God?” With this remark W.W. encounters a common problem for film criticism, namely that actual audiences may react very divergently to any given film and can display a notorious resistance to a film’s effects and consequences, be they intended or not. Cinema attendance at the time was an extremely popular activity and one of the few affordable means of distraction. Thomas Brandlmeier cites figures that in the immediate postwar years audience numbers fast reached very high proportions since a movie ticket at 1.- RM was a relative bargain in comparison to a piece of butter with a black market value of 250.- RM. Cf. Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” p. 34. As Marc Silberman notes, dubbed Soviet films were released within a month after capitulation and comedies and apolitical dramas from the Nazi period were re-released in all zones. Cf. Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit: Wayne State University

in the reviewer's insistence on the absence of the Christian category of redemption and forgiveness in the film, which is also amplified by his repeated use of the phrase "after all," or "im Grunde," to search for the origins of the audience rejection and his confusion about what constitutes the solution that the film offers. Yet W.W. nonetheless registers an awareness of the visual iconography as his invocation of the crucifixion indicates. The fact that even in his brief description the reviewer makes reference to the Cross of Golgatha is therefore surely not accidental, because this is precisely the iconography that the film reaches at the end in the images towards which "it dares to thrust," to remain within the review's discursive register and which seems to linger in his description.

In other words, the film does, in fact, come to the conclusion for which W.W. chastises it, namely that "human guilt is only recognized in the face of God." Thus, in a noteworthy reversal of logic in the review, W.W. deduces that it can only be due to the absence of a profound humility in light of the promise of divine atonement that the audience members respond with nihilist taunts since, in his erroneous memory, the film does not offer a Christian solution but rather remains stuck or "clenched" (*verkrampt*) within a secular or profane definition of guilt and judgment. This means the conclusion that W.W. reaches can only be grounded in the assumption that either the film or the audience lacks an understanding of the religious dimension of forgiveness, which would then explain to him what causes audiences to respond dismissively to the film.

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Press, 1995), p. 100. For W.W. this may have meant that simply the "wrong" people had gone to see the film, but on a more important level, his review also serves as a record of the immense pedagogical difficulty and the work involved in the education of the German people in terms of how to think of the medium film again.

Since the film's conclusion, in fact, works in the converse by retreating into an allegorical dimension of guilt, the reviewer's plaintive search for the causal origins of this nihilism seems woefully misguided. What the conclusion suggests is that the film's ending already contributes to an incipient notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as a form of absolution in its way of "surmounting" the immediate past through the familiar allegorical appeal to a higher power of judgment as its inevitable destiny. Therefore, the cynical rejection of the film by the audience members recorded by W.W. might not necessarily be explicable by the absence of a religious dimension, an assertion of transference into which he must place a lot of faith since otherwise, as he hopes, the audience "would hardly" ("wohl kaum") have responded in the manner that he had witnessed. Instead, it may be grounded in an awareness of the opposite, namely a contemptuous familiarity with the recognizably established presence of a sacral iconography and with an excessively repetitive mode of allegorical signification which recognizes the film's attempts at the solicitation of the ultimate figure of authority and the means to sanctify this figure once more.

In other words, the film's gestures toward a religious dimension are very much present, but they no longer carry with them a chastening or purifying effect, which is what W.W. would like the film to achieve. Even a merely edifying effect is absent in the responses, much to the consternation and concern of the reviewer. The solution he imagines through his recourse to the figure of the cross of Golgatha does not work, precisely because this iconography has already long been enlisted and abused. In a changed context in which the same configuration is now displaced into the service of an appeal to a different disciplinary conception of power, namely a Christian one that promises to combine a divine authority for judgment with the virtue of mercy, such attempts are easily met with ridicule.

The mode of signification that attempts to impose a disciplinary category operates not only in the privileged moments of the beginning and the end but is structured as writing throughout the film. As part of the dramaturgical construction, various registers of writing are deployed against each other. So, for example, Susanne's line of work is to design posters that in their direct and manipulative appeal are the functional equivalent of propaganda, but which espouse sentiments of social integration and communal spirit such as one that says "save the children." This prompts Mertens to ridicule these attempts of discursive interventions with cynical self-pity and sarcasm. In contrast to Susanne's bright-eyed faith in the power of placards and her spirited determination for everything that enables reconstruction and progress, stands another tenant of the building, Herr Bartholomäus Timm, a shadowy but slightly effete and bespectacled figure of manipulation, who trades in, as a sign on his door reads, the "scientific divination of the future." As he tells the optician Mondschein, his occult skills are in "high demand" because the people's sense of confidence and their security have been shattered. To alleviate these problems he is able to explain to them "how all matters great and small are connected in the cosmos" as he states.

This occurs at the same time that Susanne discovers Mertens' past when she accidentally finds a letter that Mertens has in his possession, addressed to the widow of his commanding officer Major Brückner. As it turns out Brückner is alive and "living very well," as he tells Susanne. By contrast, the ailing Mondschein is still troubled because of his missing son and enlists Herr Timm's help in attempting to solve the mystery of his whereabouts through a letter, which is the last sign of life that he received from his son while he was at the front. For the price of ten marks, Herr Timm is able to use the letter to visualize a bridge on which Mondschein will meet his son again and Mondschein, who wants to be assured and desperately needs a sign of

hope, is more than willing to believe him. The film spells out very clearly how the power of suggestion, especially the kind that invokes the occult and the category of destiny, works easily on gullible people, but at the same time it postulates that its audience will be able to detect this as a cynical manipulation and “read” the symptoms properly and unambiguously.<sup>76</sup> When Mondschein dies without having been reunited with his son, the sequence that makes this evident returns to a mode of writing that follows the explicit inscription of silent film and insists on an unequivocal act of reading as recognition without any recourse to dialogue and only a faint musical tune.

What is visible is Mondschein’s coffin being carried out of the building. We know this because his store is desolate and empty, while the snow at his doorstep is pristine and undisturbed by footprints. The shadows of the funeral procession are reflected on the wall as they pass by Herr Timm’s sign that reads “your future is foretold by Herr Bartholomäus Timm in accordance with strict scientific method.” At this point the film demands from its audience the ability to discern and read these signs in their proper manner and thus turns to an almost abecedarian didacticism. However, this didactic insistence on explicit signification is less interesting for its heavy-handed approach than for the community of readers it imagines. The

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<sup>76</sup> Juxtaposed with the sequence when Herr Timm skillfully manipulates Mondschein is a scene in which two house tenants gossip about the cohabitation of Susanne and Mertens. Lest their intentions come across as ambiguous, the film shows their chattering facial profiles in distorted shadows that make their silhouettes appear like obviously grotesque caricatures with pointy, elongated noses and dramatically receding necklines. A charitable reading of this moment would note the lasting influence of F.W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* in the imagery here, but the caricature, in conjunction with the depiction of Herr Timm as an occult charlatan who projects an insidious aura of intellectualism and greed, adheres to more recent and immediately recognizable encodings of difference along racial and ethnic lines.

film's faith in the self-evidence of the writing on the screen, along the same lines that propel Susanne's posters propagating the necessary means that will eliminate social ills, is grounded in a sense of moral indignation that assumes its proper recognition through the transparent legibility of its inscription. In fact, this assumption points to the real efforts against failure in the film because it attempts to orchestrate a sense of collective outrage by recourse to the inscription in the image. Once again, that is, the writing serves to literalize and capture an event that defines the limits of representation and displaces it onto the authority of the written text by insisting that the disjunction between the coffin and the sign that promises a future determined by "scientific divination" will suffice to mark the affective cognition of betrayal and belief.

As an act of designation, this shift replicates another significant moment that works even more profoundly in a sequence that finally determines the relation between Mertens and his superior Brückner and clarifies the narrative dichotomy between the two characters. When Brückner hears the news that Mertens is alive as well, Mertens is invited to dine with Brückner and his family in their opulent and immaculate villa that stands in stark contrast to the ruins surrounding it. Afterwards, Mertens experiences a traumatic flashback that is shown through a close-up of his face with his pupils beginning to shift rapidly while the sounds of war return. When the film returns to Brückner he is shown as someone who is enjoying his cup of coffee and a sandwich. Brückner, whose thin moustache and round glasses make him a dead ringer for Heinrich Himmler, displays an ease and self-assuredness which Susanne mistakes for an "enviably unexpended" disposition.<sup>77</sup> He calmly continues his meal while the camera lingers on the headline of the newspaper on the table. The paper's headline reads "2 Million People Gassed!

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<sup>77</sup> She characterizes Brückner's cheerful demeanor as "beneidenswert unverbraucht," which prompts hysterical laughter by Mertens.

Reports from the concentration camp Auschwitz.” This information, however, is of no relevance to Brückner, who instead chooses to concentrate on masticating and sipping his cup of coffee.

Here the film replicates the mode of inscription that determines the transparent legibility of Brückner’s status and, in turn, marks him in the image as unable to “read” properly. The emphasis on transparency and its concomitant legibility of pathological signs is significant throughout the film,<sup>78</sup> but here the writing in the headline points to the fundamental epistemic disjunction between his demeanor and his knowledge. Thus, it seems, Brückner’s real crime is his failure to “read himself” in the writing and be adequately traumatized by this process of inscription. This failed act of reading, which at the same time is displaced as a responsibility onto the spectator, defines a symptomatology that already points to another failure. This is the famous “inability to mourn,” which, as Eric Santner paraphrases it, reflects the failure of Germans to “work through the traumatic shattering of the specular relations they had maintained with Hitler and the *Volksgemeinschaft*.”<sup>79</sup> As he continues, this work would have entailed the willingness to confront the narcissistic idea of identity by reconstructing “a sense of self [that] would first have to be reconstituted on the ruins of this narcissism.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, through a refusal of this process, the Germans were able to displace onto themselves the mark that designates them as victims. Despite the literalization of this necessity, that is, Brückner refuses to read the writing on the screen and, in the absence of this work, his refusal of the imperative demand to do so marks him

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<sup>78</sup> The notion of transparency is also invoked when Mertens starts to overcome his trauma and begins to decorate the apartment for Susanne and him. Since they have no access to glass, in contrast to Brückner, Mertens “reconstructs” their windows by using x-ray slides from the hospital where he had been a surgeon.

<sup>79</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 3 – 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

as one to whom the ultimate designation of contempt that Mertens can muster applies, namely the one that defines him as a “bourgeois” or *Spießbürger*.<sup>81</sup>

The reconstitution of self thus occurs through the emblematic inscription that the writing in the film designates as present but instead displaces onto the spectator in an attempt at substitution. In contrast, then, to Santner’s assessment that such conceptualizations are part of a more recent critical development, since they are defined by the “rhetoric of mourning which has come to occupy the semantic field of so much critical theory in recent years,”<sup>82</sup> the use of writing here already enacts the appeal that, in lieu of the work of “reading” that Brückner fails to achieve, displaces the burden onto the spectator of the film in an imperative mode that Santner attributes to the poststructuralist “arch-trope” of the “figure of the mourner-survivor.”<sup>83</sup> According to Santner, this figure is anticipated by Benjamin’s category of the baroque as the “irreducible elegiac dimension of signification,”<sup>84</sup> which determines that the subject remains “marooned in a world of ruins, fragments, stranded objects that thereby take on a textual aspect: they demand to be read.”<sup>85</sup> As Santner notes, this corresponds to Jacques Derrida’s insistence “on the testamentary – the proleptically or structurally elegiac – dimension of every linguistic

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<sup>81</sup> While the term *Spießbürger* or *Spießler* is adequately translated as *bourgeois*, with its connotative implications of narrow-minded conformity, selfish bigotry and undue obsequiousness, *bourgeois* fails to indicate the term’s military etymology still present in the word as an early modern expendable foot-soldier equipped only with a spear or “Spieß.”

<sup>82</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



utterance.”<sup>86</sup> In turn, this categorical condition is defined by a fundamental “refusal or an inability on the part of the members of a society to assume the vocation of mourner-survivor of what might be called the violence of the signifier.”<sup>87</sup> This refusal is enacted by Brückner on the screen and the demand for the vocation is transferred onto the spectator in his stead. Save for the recourse to the technical term “signifier,” then, Santner accurately summarizes the use of writing that the film marshals and solicits time and time again.

As if these efforts were not enough, Staudte returns to such configurations even more insistently in his third film after the war, *Rotation* from 1949. In artistic terms, this film was a significant achievement in the “attempt to revitalize the tradition of Weimar proletarian cinema,”<sup>88</sup> as Marc Silberman puts it. With the film, Staudte returns to the “question of personal responsibility but now posed almost autobiographically,”<sup>89</sup> as Silberman notes, and demonstrates Staudte’s commitment to a “program of humanism and the process of ideological clarification”<sup>90</sup> that was fostered by returning German exiles in the Soviet zone. These efforts form part of a “series of films that would come to be identified later as DEFA’s antifascist classicism.”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, *Rotation* was a very popular film in the Eastern sector, but in the Western zones it was only screened in Bochum and Hamburg in 1950 and thereafter only exhibited through the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>88</sup> Marc Silberman, “Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (Germany 1949),” in Joachim Schmitt-Sasse, ed., *Widergänger: Faschismus und Antifaschismus im Film*, p. 138.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 101.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

“art-house and film club circuit.”<sup>92</sup> It was shown on West German television in May 1958, where it generated some controversy and provoked the particular ire of a Bavarian politician and national-conservative lobbyist for the Sudetes Germans in the *BHE*, or “Union for Those Displaced from Home and Those Deprived of Rights,” who publicly protested the broadcast and accused the film of “mongering in communist class warfare” while following the “usual Eastern diction” of Soviet propaganda.<sup>93</sup>

These charges are indicative for the film’s exceptional willingness to investigate some of the causes of fascism and the individual small-scale compromises along with a silent complicity that made its pervasive control possible. In this respect, the film is already unusual because it does not avoid what Greffrath calls the “typical blind spot, the omission of 1933 – 1938,” for the German cinema of the period.<sup>94</sup> As Thomas Brandlmeier remarks, the film raises “the question of guilt indeed anew” because it “admits the proletarian complicity and fellow-traveling under fascism.”<sup>95</sup> Given these efforts, the film remains an important document for the failures and limit points circumscribed in the debates surrounding the explanations of the origin and rise of fascism at the time. Nonetheless, the conclusion that Brandlmeier reaches when he ultimately dismisses the film as another furtively “opportunist” attempt to “glance sidelong at the audience as the new

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Marc Silberman, “Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (Germany 1949),” p. 149.

<sup>93</sup> These charges were voiced by Walter Becher, representative in the Bavarian parliament for the *Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten* or *BHE* from 1950 – 1962, who had been the editor for the National Socialist newspaper of the “Reichsgau Sudetenland” until 1945. Cf. Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit*, pp. 151 – 152.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Brandlmeier, “Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme,” p. 45.

people of the state with an eagerly conciliatory tendency”<sup>96</sup> is misdirected because it obscures the difficult terrain of signification the film gestures toward.

What Brandlmeier faults the film for is its apparent eagerness in the attempt to solicit the audience’s sympathy and its offering of a conciliatory sense of inclusion that ultimately absolves the audience from reflecting critically on the ideological premises of the film. Instead, Brandlmeier suggests, the film elicits the possibility for the absolution of individual responsibility so that audience members can bask in a collective sense of atonement. This reversal is necessary because it provides the operative premise for a civic identity within the disciplinary constructions of a new state system. Silberman comes to a similar conclusion when he argues that the film addresses a specific “historical spectator, suggesting a resolution that perpetuates the idea of individual victimization but yet allows for an imaginary transformation of guilt into the positive virtue of the individual as an agent of civic responsibility.”<sup>97</sup> As a consequence, Silberman argues, the film caters to a conservative sense of powerlessness and destiny that is reinforced by a conception of history in which “events like fascism are catastrophes that befall mankind.”<sup>98</sup> This, he concludes, is a result of the film’s naïve narrative proposal of the self as an agent for historical change, which runs counter to the film’s effort to

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Brandlmeier here offers a particularly illustrative example for a certain discursive mode in German critical thought that displays an acute alacrity for registering ideological contradictions and an alert fondness for categorical failures at the cost of reducing the complexity of either the filmic work itself or its gestures toward achievement. Brandlmeier states that the film shares with others a fundamental flaw, or, as he says in the original: “Sie schielen in ihrer Tendenz versöhnlerisch aufs Publikum als neues Staatsvolk. In *Rotation* verzeiht zum Schluß der, der selbst ein Mitläufer war, dem Faschisten. Dem neuen antifaschistischen Opportunismus wir damit Tür und Tor geöffnet.”

<sup>97</sup> Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 103.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

demonstrate the consequences of accommodation, “not by denouncing the petit bourgeoisie but by representing the system of social oppression to which it fell victim.”<sup>99</sup>

Bettina Greffrath, by contrast, praises the film as a “distinctive sociogram,”<sup>100</sup> which “displays an exceptional degree of reflexivity and analytical distance that embraces its bias.”<sup>101</sup> She cites a number of representative contemporary reviews, which responded enthusiastically to the film’s formal aesthetics and narrative construction, including a review in the West German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that praises Staudte for his “epic calm and brave yet temperate avant-gardism.”<sup>102</sup> As Greffrath recounts, the young journalist Wolfgang Kohlhaase, who would later become one of the most important screenwriters of the East German cinema, wrote in the youth magazine *Start* that the film offers “a consoling certitude for people: it is always and especially today up to the individual himself what will become of him.”<sup>103</sup> Given the film’s popularity in light of these diametrical assessments, which replicate the controversy over Staudte’s earlier film *Murderers are Among Us* in a more starkly delineated polarity, it becomes important again to investigate the mechanisms by which the film attempts to generate its conception of the relation between individual and historical forces.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>100</sup> Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit*, p. 146.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. In the original: “*Rotation* zeigt... einen außergewöhnlichen Reflexionsgrad und eine parteilich-analytische Distanz.”

<sup>102</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 11, 1953, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 151. In the original: “Staudtes optische Gestaltung brilliert mit kühnem und dennoch maßvollem Avantgardismus:... Montagen, rhythmische Rasanzen und gleichwohl souveräne epische Ruhe.”

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 147.

From the outset, the mode of signification that Staudte employs works on a level of configuration which follows a stringent logic of succession, but which is even more insistent on an associative coherence of inscription than the opening of *Murderers are Among Us*. Without any credit sequence, *Rotation* opens with the images of the intricate machinery of a printing press over which the title of the film is superimposed and which finds its visual analogy in the moving cogs and gears of the press. The deafening sounds of the rotating presses merge with the sounds of explosions that penetrate the room, while the drums are noisily churning out the latest edition of a newspaper. Some women are still busy arranging batches of the paper, but around them soldiers are cowered on the floor as furniture is collapsing around them with each detonation. The rotating wheels come to a brief halt and between the platens and cylinders the typeset page reveals the neatly underlined headline “Battle for Berlin.” The headline is part of the night edition of the newspaper *Der Angriff* (“the attack”), a paper for the official administrative district or “Gau” of Berlin founded by Joseph Goebbels, whose official functions included his position as the district leader or “Gauleiter” of Berlin. Since its inception as a mass circular in 1927, *Der Angriff* had been aimed at a working-class audience and served as the main outlet for Goebbels’ inflammatory articles during the Weimar years. As yet another call to arms, the headline attempts to mobilize the same fervor and fanaticism once more, but even the workers in the printing press room are exhausted.

The film cuts from the noise of the room and the neatly typeset headline to its aural and graphic antithesis. We now see various helpless graffiti inscriptions on a prison wall, with the rallying cry “for freedom” etched prominently and diagonally into the concrete as the soundtrack has gone silent. Other graffiti on the wall is comprised of other defiant cries, initials and names, among them the names Heinz Weiss and Karl Zech, and their execution dates. Between these

haphazardly placed names there are crosses that indicate various dates of death as well as lines that mark the duration of days in a prison cell. Juxtaposed with the crosses is one of the inscriptions of time that indicates six days in the annotation for a group of five, as a cluster of five vertical lines and one diagonal line going through four of them. Because of this cluster, the lines are obliquely reminiscent of the inscription “INRI” that is emblematic for a crucifixion. As the camera pulls back, more graffiti on the wall becomes visible, marking tributes to names of lovers and friends, along with phrases in various languages such as the French “adieu à tous” and what looks like Polish writing.<sup>104</sup> This tableau of inscriptions is anchored in its center by the single word “Mutter,” or “mother,” as the figure of a man in striped prison garments moves into view within the frame of the image. The camera comes to a rest and lingers on the writing while the man stands to the right of the graffiti-covered wall as he reads the inscriptions in silence.

There is nothing else for him to do than to remain standing there in a mute gesture of commemoration that pays tribute to the absent writers of these markings and the names that they refer to. The man’s silent tribute is a contemplation of these marks, since the inscriptions are the futile expressions of a writing that never imagined the promise of a corresponding audience of readers but rather served only as a desperate attempt to record some traces as evidence of an existence. The camera takes up this act of tribute by resting on this tableau, so that the audience

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<sup>104</sup> While it might seem like facetious sophistry in this context to fault the production design for any lack of verisimilitude, there is a minor orthographic discrepancy in this French inscription since it actually reads “adieu a tous [*sic*].” More than anything, this error suggests an earnest attempt at capturing the authentic typographical quality of a foreign language without a comprehensive knowledge of what, after all, had been the language of the “enemy” for decades. Likewise, the name inscribed on the wall appears to read “Français,” which as an adjective means “French,” but it is not a name as such since it is neither the nominal male “François” nor the female “Françoise.”

replicates the act of commemoration as we pause to read the inscriptions alongside the image of a man reading the writing on the wall. Another cut shows that outside even the battle seems to continue in silence for a while until an old lady clutching a loaf of bread is felled by a grenade with a howling noise. Within the intermittent noise of war that punctuates the images, humans have ceased to speak and are no longer in control. All that they can do is to run for cover through the ruins as mute and helpless figures in the distance. The explosions and the destruction of the machinery of war have taken on a chaotic and indiscriminate force of their own, a force that directs itself now more against buildings and material objects, so that people have become only a small and irrelevant element in the infrastructure of war.

The notion of humans as subsumed under larger forces is emblemized as a battle waged between inanimate signs and slogans. We see crates burning on which the label “margarine” is consumed by flames as a small group of soldiers runs by. The next shot emphasizes this even more as it shows an emptied-out platform of a train station with abandoned luggage strewn all around. A ghost-like boxcar rumbles by on the tracks as a pure automated vector of force without any purpose or destination since no locomotive engine is pulling it. A huge inspirational slogan that reads “wheels must revolve for there to be victory”<sup>105</sup> has been painted on its side, but now the wheels are revolving automatically and have gained an inevitable and independent momentum. A tower is hit and collapses, which finally stops the boxcar in its tracks. The momentum of phrases circulating, however, is continued, since the film now cuts to a poster that declares “we will never capitulate.” A lengthy pan sequence begins as the camera pulls away from the slogan to reveal that nurses and doctors are working to help the wounded under this

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<sup>105</sup> A well-known propaganda slogan, frequently printed on train cars, that attempted to fuse the spectacle of a train roaring by with a sense of the inevitable power of conviction: “Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg.”

sign. The pan continues onto another sign that reads “field dressing station” and then closes in on the uniform of a junior SS-squad leader who is now wearing the badge *Bahnhofswache* or “train station police.” A disembodied voice comes from a radio to broadcast the latest reports from military headquarters. The officer turns and looks up and the camera tilts upward with him to reveal that we are underground where masses of people are sitting on steps silently. They are reduced to cowering as they anxiously await the impending catastrophe.

No one speaks as they sit and endure the radio broadcast that reports “heavy fighting,” but proclaims the strategic progresses of “our young and dynamic divisions.” The camera is still in motion, panning along the masses of people, and now focuses on a poster that declares “silence!” From the poster the camera continues to pan right to frame an elderly man reading the *Panzerbär*, the literal translation of which means “the armored bear.”<sup>106</sup> Its stylized logo, in which a bear carries a bazooka and a shovel on its shoulders, is visible above the headline that urges everyone to abide and declares “we will prevail!”<sup>107</sup> The pan continues past a woman who seems to take this slogan to heart as she applies lipstick in order to maintain a semblance of

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<sup>106</sup> *Der Panzerbär* was a short-lived publication during the last weeks of April 1945, a tract or *Kampfblatt* with the slogan “battle paper for the defenders of Greater Berlin.” It took its name from the bear in Berlin’s coat of arms and was intended to be “read and passed on,” as it said on its cover. The German Historical Museum in Berlin has placed a facsimile of the cover page of the very last edition of the paper, published on April 29, 1945, online. Its headlines announced “heroic struggle: new intervention forces are dispatched into the city day and night,” “the battle for the city center has erupted,” and an editorial with the headline “the longer breath,” presumably to answer the question of which forces would be able to “hold their breath longer” and prevail. After this publication ceased. Two and a half days later, in the morning hours of May 2, 1945, Berlin capitulated. Cf. the document made available in the “virtual online museum” of the *Deutsche Historische Museum*, Berlin, at <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/objekte/pict/d2y00503/>.

<sup>107</sup> The slogan is “wir halten durch,” which means “we will prevail,” but it has a more colloquial register with the tonal equivalent of “we will abide and stick it out.”



quotidian life, until the shot frames the sign “welfare and food-supply station,” where soldiers are gathered underneath and listen to the radio which continues its status report. This sign above them is mounted on top of a travel poster that proclaims “first victory, then travels.”<sup>108</sup> A woman passes by in deep thought until she absorbs the news coming from the radio update that reports the “heaviest fighting with the bolshevists around the area Tiergarten – Moabit.” Her face is singled out and now framed in a medium close-up. She looks up, gasps at the mention of Moabit, and runs up past the crowds sitting on the steps of the Potsdamer Platz subway station, as a sign now reveals. There are too many people in her way, so she runs back and crosses the tracks of the subway on which beds for the wounded have been placed to the other side of the station but she finds that it is equally crowded.

This marks the end of the elaborate panning sequence and we now see a sign marking the street “Alt-Moabit” collapsing to the ground.<sup>109</sup> The film returns to the shot of the man staring at the writing on the prison wall, where the noise of the explosions is now audible in the distance. A

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<sup>108</sup> “Erst siegen, dann reisen.”

<sup>109</sup> Staudte, who had spent the war years in Berlin, combines an exceptional sense of urban space with historical accuracy here. The street Alt-Moabit is the location of the Berlin main prison, so that the name “Moabit” is often synonymous for jail in Berlin dialect. However, Alt-Moabit also indicates the proximity to the so-called *Zellengefängnis Lehrter Straße*, a detention center in the vicinity of the Moabit prison, which was located close to the intersection of the streets Invalidenstrasse, Alt-Moabit, and Lehrter Strasse. The jail on Lehrter Strasse contained a special section for political prisoners established by the Gestapo. The prison was the site of countless executions, and became infamous for a particularly heinous act in the last days of the war when sixteen prisoners, among them the prominent resistance fighter Klaus Bonhoeffer, were summarily executed there in the night of April 22, 1945 as the Red Army was closing in.

close-up reveals his face with a prominent scar on his forehead.<sup>110</sup> The camera cuts to the writing on the wall again. The light of the explosions outside illuminate the prison bars which cast their shadows onto the graffiti-covered wall. Silberman takes this to indicate the first instance of the motif of entrapment that will operate throughout the film and states that what we witness is the man's face and "flashes of light from exploding bombs casting the symbolic shadow pattern of bars across his face."<sup>111</sup> While this understanding is certainly suggestive, it misidentifies the "symbolic" registers that function in the image here. The shadows of the bars are, in fact, not imposed onto the man's face, but are inscribed onto the wall in flashes of lighting on top of the prisoners' scrawling. As the camera pans slowly across the writing, subsequent flashes of lighting impose the horizontal and vertical shadow lines of the bars like crosses on top of the names onto the wall. This writing with light occurs five times in a row until the final bars inscribe a single cross onto the writing and a title is inscribed as a flash of light that superimposes itself onto the writing of the wall as well. "It began twenty years ago," the title reads, and the film's first dissolve turns the crosses on the wall into the bars of a railroad crossing which are unfolding to open up.

Rather than emphasizing the motif of entrapment, the shadow crosses that are marked by flashes of light onto the wall suggest instances of sacrifice as more and more inscriptions are added onto the wall. Now, however, these sacrifices come at such a pace that they can no longer

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<sup>110</sup> In keeping with the iconography that generates biblical allusions, Silberman identifies this scar as the mark of guilt or a "Cain-like sign." Cf. Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 112. While it is important to acknowledge the biblical references here, the scar indicates the torture that Behnke suffers at the hands of the Gestapo. However, because the scar looks like a Y-figure, it already suggests a prolepsis to the figuration of the final images, which also involve two branching forks in the road as the discussion below will demonstrate.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

even be recorded in permanence and instead they “scurry by” as an “image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again,”<sup>112</sup> to invoke Walter Benjamin’s by now frequently quoted dictum from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written shortly before his death in 1940. Indeed, Staudte comes close here to reconfiguring Benjamin’s thesis of the “true picture of the past”<sup>113</sup> as an image itself. For Benjamin, the only way the past can be “captured” is as a brief illumination that “scurries by.” And this, he continues, “is an irretrievable image of the past that threatens to disappear with every present that did not see itself as addressed by it.”<sup>114</sup> Standing in front of the wall, the prisoner sees in the markings on the wall

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<sup>112</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Walter Benjamin. Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255. In this edition the translation reads: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” I have taken the liberty to replace “flits by” with the verb “scurry,” to emphasize even more the rapid lateral movement Benjamin’s use of the verb *huschen* evokes. In the original: “Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *huscht* vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten.” Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), p. 253. (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>113</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” p. 255.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I*, p. 253. (Translation mine.) Harry Zorn’s translation justifiably favors comprehensibility over construction, but in this particular instance he displaces the “every” from “jede Gegenwart” to the “image of the past” and thus cedes the agency of recognition to the present that see in it “its own concerns.” However, Benjamin emphasizes that “every present” is articulated by, or “meant to be spoken to,” by the image of the past and it is this intentional address that the present needs to recognize. Cf. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” p. 255. The original reads: “Denn es ist ein unwiederbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte.”

the true judgment of his life at the moment of impending death.<sup>115</sup> In the act of reading the writing, this insight is displaced onto the spectator as well, who is first “addressed by the writing” and then inscribed into the writing with the title that transports the film to the “true image” of the past, as it claims that “it began twenty years ago.” When after the dissolve into the past the barriers are lifted in the image as the train crossing opens up again, the woman from the subway station runs across the tracks and walks smilingly toward the camera. Speaking directly into the camera she says, “Oh my, I almost didn’t recognize you.” Only then does the film cut to the subject of her address, who is revealed to be the man from the prison doffing his hat. They are, we will learn now, almost five minutes into the film, Hans Behnke and Lotte, his future wife, on their first date. They take a stroll down a road in the countryside and when they come to a fork in the road they decide to walk down the path to the right.

Perhaps the construction of this lengthy image sequence around the functions of writing is too elaborate and complicated to render in succinct terms, but even this does not explain the variance with which Becker and Schöll reduce this introductory sequence to the following. The film “begins,” they assert, with an “elaborate flashback by Hans Behnke who sits in the prison of Berlin as an inmate.”<sup>116</sup> Behnke, they continue, “hears the noise of the battle outside and reminisces about his happiness twenty years before.”<sup>117</sup> In their eagerness to delineate the

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<sup>115</sup> In biblical terms, the writing on the wall reflects God’s enigmatic judgment of King Belshazzar of Babylon in the Old Testament and the prophecy of his fall as deciphered by the prophet Daniel. As such, the sequence corresponds to Benjamin’s more Messianic articulations as well.

<sup>116</sup> Wolfgang Becker and Norbert Schöll, *In Jenen Tagen...: Wie der Deutsche Nachkriegsfilm die Vergangenheit bewältigte*, p. 157. (Translation mine.) The use of the verb *sitzen* here suggests an unfortunate pun because it is also a slang term with the equivalent of “doing time in the slammer.”

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

potential ideological fault lines of the film, Becker and Schöll fail to pay attention to the film itself and therefore do not see that Staudte presents neither an act of “sitting” nor an act of “hearing” here but rather a complex visual construction that reflects on the importance of how to stand in relation to the signs one is forced to read. Becker and Schöll define the frequent use of temporal flashbacks in the films of the period as a means to establish a “moral high-handedness”<sup>118</sup> that serves to differentiate the present from the past. In doing so, they argue, the “intended attitude for the spectator is to foster a new, state-affirming, sense of ‘thank God it is no longer like this today.’”<sup>119</sup> Through this they suggest the film’s categorical failure by aligning itself with a mode of separation between present and past. Without recourse to such categories, they hint that this attitude serves to achieve a secondary mode of differentiation that establishes an ontological difference through which it becomes possible to portray fascism as “inhuman” by separating it from the definitions of humanism, which, in turn, removes the notions of agency and complicity.<sup>120</sup>

The film deserves a more nuanced assessment, given its elaborate montage of writing with which it introduces itself already. Staudte himself may have invited such dismissive responses to the visual qualities in his work, since in interviews he coyly “admitted that he was ignorant of film history”<sup>121</sup> and he modestly claimed that *Rotation* was “formally completely

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 147. In the original: “moralische Selbstgewißheit.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>121</sup> In an interview from 1966. Cited in Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 105.

uninteresting.”<sup>122</sup> Such protestations notwithstanding, the use of the flashback here enacts on a large scale a visual motif that is repeated throughout the film. This motif is most frequently depicted as a rotary press that marks events in time by turning out newspaper headlines, as the “wheels are turning,” to speak with its metaphoric register. Yet the film incorporates many images of rotation, circles, or revolving wheels, from the outset. In fact, the rendezvous scenes that inaugurate the flashback itself ends with an image of a record spinning as the gramophone needle jumps rhythmically in the end grooves.<sup>123</sup> The emphasis on the image of circularity functions, in Silberman’s terms, to offer “a pedagogical and polemical model for motivating the process of self-reflection.”<sup>124</sup> In emphasizing the significance of the figure of circularity, Silberman proves himself to be one of the few scholars of German cinema who remark on the importance of the use of figuration in general and the use of writing in film here in particular as well. He notes the relevance of the use of “printed matter in the film’s discursive economy”<sup>125</sup> and he references the work of Jens Thiele, who suggests that the “scriptural images” serve as a commentary that relates public events to the “protagonist’s private biography.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> In an interview from 1974. Cited in Jens Thiele, “Die Lehren aus der Vergangenheit: *Rotation* (1949),” in *Fischer Filmgeschichte. Band 3: Auf der Suche nach Werten 1945 – 1960*, ed. Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1990), p. 135.

<sup>123</sup> While establishing the iconic register of circularity, Staudte nonetheless displays an understated visual wit here, since the camera pans from an open box of chocolate via a cigarette burning in the ash tray to the needle jumping rhythmically in order to suggest that Lotte and Hans are in the process of consummating their relationship.

<sup>124</sup> Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 109.

<sup>125</sup> Marc Silberman, “Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (Germany 1949),” p. 146.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

In fact, Thiele dismisses the prison-wall sequence, which he contrasts to the “actual, inner film plot,”<sup>127</sup> but demonstrates how the use of writing in the film constitutes, in his terms, a “film within the film,”<sup>128</sup> serving as a running commentary. As he notes, “in pure numerical terms, every second sequence in the film is characterized by inscriptions, newspaper headlines, phrases, or quotations.”<sup>129</sup> However, despite his astute observations he does not consider these inscriptions as inscriptions. Instead, he follows the familiar displacement in which the writing itself is subordinate in its representative function of speech, rather than as an image of writing itself. Thus, he argues, the writing in the film becomes its “own inner word-film”<sup>130</sup> that narrates the relation between individual and social forces. Even the prison graffiti, he concludes, only serves to highlight the “frenzy of war and the cynicism of the regime.”<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, Thiele acknowledges the significance of the figure of circularity in the frequent recourse to the image of the rotating press. He marks five instances at which the rotating press serves to function as a hinge that connects the sequences and “represents the seemingly inexorable course of historical events.”<sup>132</sup>

The rotating press describes a figure of circularity that is determined by a sense of inevitable force, which underscores the movement that animates this figure. This force suggests an associative causality through linkages, a force that works in the same manner as the opening of Staudte’s earlier film. The transitions that follow show the young couple, Hans Behnke and

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<sup>127</sup> Jens Thiele, “Die Lehren aus der Vergangenheit: *Rotation* (1949),” p. 129.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* In the original: “Eigener innerer Wortfilm.”

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

Lotte, trying to make ends meet but failing to do so despite their earnest attempts. In various vignettes of ordinary life, the conditions and circumstances conspire to work against the couple and at each step they have to compromise and adjust opportunistically to the situation that they have to face on a small scale until their passive compliance to circumstances is absolute. Hans, a printer by trade, gains employment in the printing room of the *Völkische Beobachter*, the official publication of the Nazi party, and thus unwittingly becomes a crucial linchpin and relay station in the circulation and dissemination of propaganda. The rise of Hitler and the pervasive intrusion of politics into ordinary life is chronicled through the couple's experience rendered as the fate that all decent people had to endure, yet at the same time the film takes note of their complicity by establishing a causal nexus of their act of looking away with the deportation of their neighbors. By the time they have allowed these events to happen their son, Helmut, is old enough to become party to this form of corruption as well since he becomes a fervent Hitler youth.

The linkage of the interconnectedness between individual responses and their choices with large-scale historical events is demonstrated with associative sequences. One particular montage sequence is exemplary for this technique. A children's parade by members of the Hitler Youth who sing "we will march on until everything falls into pieces, because today Germany is ours, but tomorrow the whole world will belong to us"<sup>133</sup> cuts directly to a lengthy school

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<sup>133</sup> From the song "Es zittern die morschen Knochen" ("the brittle bones are shaking"), composed by Hans Baumann in 1932 when he was member of a Catholic youth organization. It was taken up by the Hitler Youth and became an exceedingly popular song due to its martial quality, celebrating a youthful victory over "fear" and "old people," while exhorting "the red war." The lines of the refrain are still cause for the occasional debate, since the version adapted by the Hitler Youth, and thus the one sung in the film, is "wir werden weiter marschieren, bis alles in Scherben fällt, denn heute gehört uns Deutschland, und morgen die ganze Welt." Apparently, this is a variant of the



indoctrination session. This session, in turn, leads immediately to playful maneuvers of stone throwing, but then cuts abruptly to real explosions, and archival footage of marching *Wehrmacht* soldiers. Their marching picks up the same rhythm as the children singing the song before and as the rhythm of the footsteps increase in volume, the film dissolves back into writing. A long list of those who “fell for the *Führer* and the Reich” appears that lists their names and the locations of their death. The list scrolls down, adding more and more names and locations, until the marching sounds gradually fade out and the camera closes in on the varying names of locations from all over Europe, the Soviet Union and Northern Africa. By the time the list reaches the year 1942 the locations have become “Caucasus, Stalingrad, Africa, Leningrad, Crimea, Stalingrad, El Alamein, Voronezh, Malta, Stalingrad, Stalingrad.” As the scrolling movement continues and the list goes on, the name “Stalingrad” is repeated over and over again until it has become an abstracted incantation that stands as the telegraphic shorthand for disaster and defeat.

In its inscription on the screen, the names and the locations that appear replicate the same mode of contemplative reflection that the opening sequence initiates with the writing on the wall. The writing, therefore, enacts what Marcia Landy has demonstrated is the affective appeal of melodrama as an elegiac mode that is not a generic but rather a fundamental structure of theatricality in culture in which “the rituals of mourning serve better as a conduit for expressing the inexpressible, for communicating the affect that arises from the impossible quest for answers

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original refrain “wir werden weiter marschieren, *wenn* alles in Scherben fällt, denn heute *da* hört uns Deutschland, und morgen die ganze Welt.” This translates as “we will march on, *even* if everything falls into pieces, because today Germany *listens* to us, and tomorrow the whole world will,” a slight but meaningful difference that does not, however, alter the overall tenor of the song.

to injustice.”<sup>134</sup> Through the suggestion of scale, the use of writing here reverses the filmic tendency to individualize the narrative and instead gestures toward a conception in which name and meaning become identical. The repetition of variance that culminates in the rhythmic replication of the name “Stalingrad” indicates that the name itself must suffice in lieu of representation and therefore enforces a form of allegorization in which the name stands in for its reference as an incantation. As Landy demonstrates in relation to the use of writing in *Schindler’s List*, in the “conjunction of the visual image and the printed word,”<sup>135</sup> the film here gestures toward an allegorical conception of history based on “the insistent reminder of the film’s awareness of the transitoriness of history (and of the visual image) for capturing a sense of the past.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Marcia Landy, “Cinematic History, Melodrama, and the Holocaust,” in *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians*, ed. Michael A. Signer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 379.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* Landy effectively challenges the pejorative divisions of culture by demonstrating the melodramatic affinities between Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah* and a popular film such as *Schindler’s List* here. Miriam Bratu Hansen, working towards a similar approach that bridges the polarization between critical discourse and popular culture, argues that *Schindler’s List* is “not” *Shoah*. However, in her discussion, Hansen invokes a category that Landy’s attention to writing in film already suggests, namely, that a recourse to writing as a means to represent the “unrepresentable” can be grounded in “a quasi-theological invocation of the second commandment” that prohibits graven images or any likeness in representation as well. Cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “*Schindler’s List* is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. with an introduction by Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 207.

Following this elegiac sequence in writing are two scenes that counter it through the power of speech and move the film's lingering on enactments of mourning back into the realm of action. In one Behnke's brother-in-law Kurt, who is hiding from the Gestapo because he works for the resistance, finally convinces the cautious Behnke of the moral necessity to take up the fight. Kurt rebukes Behnke and accuses him of doing nothing but standing at his station, the rotating printing press, in order to let lies and hate be disseminated. Kurt urges him to stand up for the millions of people who all want the same, "work, peace and bread," and states that the front where he is stationed is the fact "that one must love the people." Behnke accepts reluctantly this and, with his professional skills as a printer, fixes a printing press that Kurt and his fellow members of the underground resistance need to print their flyers urging "the end of the insanity of the Hitler-war." At the same time Behnke's son Helmut has become a member of the Hitler Youth, where he and his peers are instructed by their charismatic commander on the virtues of being German men and enticed to remain vigilant against the "dark elements and traitors" in their midst.

Soon after, Helmut is shown casually mulling over a crossword puzzle as he asks his mother about the clue for "Tibetan bovine" with three letters. She suggests he look this up in the encyclopedia. When Helmut pulls out the appropriate volume, the rarely used volume "Y" for "yak," he flips through the pages of the encyclopedia when suddenly one of Kurt's flyers that is hidden in the book catches his eye. He is conflicted but ultimately denounces his parents to his commander, vowing never to speak to them again. They are interrogated and Kurt is arrested. The transition from Kurt's beat-up face returns to writing when a cut shows the close-up of an official notification that he has died from "heart failure" in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, accompanied by a shrill whistling sound. Thiele takes this moment seriously as one in

which an official document of writing becomes, in his terms, an active “agent that intervenes fatefully”<sup>137</sup> in the plot. In doing so, Thiele comes closest to defining the nexus of the allegorization of fate with a sense of shock that the writing in film inscribes here. This shock cathected to the notification causes Lotte to stare in paralyzed disbelief while a boiling tea kettle is revealed to be the origin of the shrill alarm. Soon after, Behnke is arrested as well and must confront his own son in Hitler Youth uniform who stares at him silently. Over his face the graffiti on the prison wall is gradually superimposed and the film returns to its beginning as time folds back into the present and we see Behnke’s memory of his son’s accusing face fading away against the inscriptions on the wall of his cell.

The film now returns to the battle for Berlin waging outside the cell, some of which consists of actual footage from Soviet archives. At the same time the military order is given to destroy all bridges in the center of the city even though this will result in the flooding of the subway stations filled with refugees. Lotte manages to escape, while thousands die in the flood. When Hans and his fellow prisoners are taken into the yard and lined up against the prison wall in order to be executed, the standard sign warning against carbon monoxide poisoning from running engines above them inscribes a deliberate analogy to the mass executions by gas. While the frightened prisoners stand and await their death, the prison is overrun by the Red Army and they are liberated. Helmut and his commander, having been enlisted in the final mobilization to hold the city at all costs, take refuge in the bedroom of a ruined house. There the commander is thrilled to discover a closet and eagerly sheds his uniform, telling Helmut that “civvies are now the last word” since “Ivan” is around the corner, after the commander had instructed his boys to

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<sup>137</sup> Jens Thiele, “Die Lehren aus der Vergangenheit,” p. 132.

fight for the “final victory” until death. Helmut breaks down in tears at this disillusioning sight and realizes the extent of his betrayal.

When the battle is over, a slow tilt from the outlines of ruined buildings downward into the gutters reveals that Lotte has died on the streets in the crossfire. The image dissolves from her face into the rotating press, onto which, in turn, is superimposed a newspaper account that lists the victims of World War II as numbers: “14.45 million casualties of war; 5.5 million murdered; 2.86 million bombed; 11 million died in concentration camps.” On top of this the total tally is superimposed, “33.8 million people,” so that the image now consists of a triple layer, the admonishing numbers, the newspaper writing containing an amount of information in fine print that is too large to be comprehensible but is legible as a quantity, and the revolutions of the printing press that continue to turn in the background.

A coda shows the prodigal son Helmut, still in uniform because he has been interned in a POW camp, with his new girlfriend Inge arriving at the home of Behnke. Helmut is reluctant, given his past behavior, to face his father, yet he desperately wants to apologize. Instead, Behnke embraces him and insists that it is “you,” the young generation, “who must forgive us.” Behnke reflects on his time in prison and tells his son that when he read the names on the wall they were names only at first but then they became “fates.”<sup>138</sup> In a preëemptive act of absolution that diffuses the categories of victim and perpetrator by reversing the question of complicity into a reconciliation along filial lines, Behnke exempts his son from the knowledge he himself has gained by telling him that life begins for him now. For Silberman, this second nod to the “appeal to patient love... as an antidote to history’s repetition seems entirely inadequate for realizing

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<sup>138</sup> As an intriguing affirmation of the figuration of writing in film as an allegorization of destiny, the term *Schicksal* that Behnke uses here connotes both “individual fate” and “destiny.”

it,”<sup>139</sup> yet he takes it to testify to Staudte’s commitment to the foundations of a democratic state. Behnke continues in this spirit and tells his son that what he has learned from the writing on the wall is that the names signify a fate that stemmed from their desire “not to become culpable” and for this desire they suffered an “unimaginable” fate. That is, the paternal gesture of forgiveness exempts the young and complicit from the burden of imagination and replaces the implications of “fate” with its allegorical substitute, the names that stand in for, as Behnke says, their “unimaginable fate.”

With this displacement, the film equates the spectator with the position of the son and thereby alleviates the responsibility for imagining. As Silberman puts it, the film proposes a rejuvenation in which Behnke now “recognizes the truth of his past and invites the textual spectator to learn his lesson.”<sup>140</sup> This provides the basis for establishing the “identificatory potential for a moral judgment.”<sup>141</sup> However, the limit point of this insight is defined by the uses of writing, so that the disciplinary pedagogy shifts to an act of recognition, but not necessarily of the “unimaginable” lesson that Behnke has learned, but, in a paraphrase of Silberman’s term of the “textual spectator,” to the spectator of the text within the film. What this means is that the reference to “historical truth” as inscribed into the image through the writing of names is placed in relation to the force of the rotating press that defines the progress of history in general. These two divergent conceptions of history collide and thus demarcate what Silberman calls the “limits

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<sup>139</sup> Marc Silberman, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, p. 113.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

to the ideological perception of powerlessness”<sup>142</sup> and Thiele calls the helpless “perplexity”<sup>143</sup> of the film’s conclusion.

Accompanying Behnke’s gesture of forgiveness is his decision to bequeath to his son the Sunday suit he wore when he met Lotte for their first date, so that Helmut can discard his POW uniform. He urges his son to work hard so that future generations will inherit a life “without danger and despair.” With this the film cuts to the railroad crossing again and shows the barricades opening. Inge, the son’s girlfriend, runs across the tracks toward the camera and repeats Lotte’s first line of dialogue, “I almost didn’t recognize you.” Without knowing it, she replicates Lotte’s exact behavior from twenty years before. Helmut tells her that his parents used to meet at this spot when they were young as well. This, Inge notes ruefully, is a sign that “everything is repeated in life.” Helmut protests urgently in response to Inge’s skepticism, and, by declaring that everything must not be repeated, insists that avoiding repetition is possible if everyone who desires peace will resist it. Walking down the selfsame country road that the parents had walked before, they come to the fork in the road but without deliberation they choose the other path, the one leading to the left.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>143</sup> Jens Thiele, “Die Lehren aus der Vergangenheit,” p. 140.

<sup>144</sup> Some critics read this shift to the left as symbolic. Silberman, however, notes that against such assessments, Staudte denied this partisan reading as a “coded signal for his hope for a socialist Germany” and insisted that, while the image was significant, the choice of direction was coincidental. Cf. Marc Silberman, “Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (Germany 1949),” p. 147.

This solution might testify to the pressures Staudte faced from the military authorities who asked him to change the ending of the film before it was allowed to be released.<sup>145</sup> It dilutes the forceful argument of the overall film before and provides the basis for the criticism that Thiele and Silberman voice against its gesture towards humanism. Nonetheless, Staudte asserted that part of the motivation for the film stemmed from the troublesome direction he saw emerging again already in 1948, which he described as the tendency that “already today too many are ready to go down the same path that unsettled Europe once more.”<sup>146</sup> More importantly, however, the insistence on the act of will as the power that can counteract the repetition of history puts the film’s conclusion in a precarious position, because it comes at a point in which the figuration of repetition has already been amplified as the engine of history. Against this force, it seems, individual aspirations of change are futile and even delusional. Given the film’s reliance on a pedagogical mode, this conclusion indeed undermines its premises and could therefore demonstrate the fragile basis on which its ideological position rests. In this case, the film, as Silberman and Thiele conclude, becomes detrimental because it unwittingly reinforces the sense of powerlessness in the face of catastrophe that it has sought so hard to counteract.

Yet, even with such a solution, which seems compromised in both senses of the term, the film is remarkable in its deliberate choice of figuration. The final image appears to place the notion of directional progress, albeit rendered as a forking path that tracks into the distance in separate lines, over and against the figure of the turn, which circumscribes an endless repetitive

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Jens Thiele, “Die Lehren aus der Vergangenheit,” p. 140. Thiele notes that the ending Staudte had envisioned earlier, the acceptance of his father’s suit by Helmut with the words “this was my last uniform,” was deemed to be too “pacifist” by the Soviet authorities in its reference to demilitarization.

<sup>146</sup> From a 1955 article by Staudte cited in Marc Silberman, “Wolfgang Staudte: *Rotation* (Germany 1949),” p. 139.



loop. But this visual figure of the path is not a vector of progress that generates an irreversible teleological direction to be followed. It is an inscription into the image itself and thus merges movement with writing again. In his early visual attempts to address the legacy of fascism thoughtfully and constructively, Staudte remains singular in the history of the German cinema of this period and the decade to come. While other uses of writing in film reinforce the discrepancy between image and text in order to allegorize a force that emerges as a system of law through which conceptions of the state become possible, *Rotation* reverses this configuration. Despite its conciliatory humanism, the film proposes a new mode of inscription. It may only be a helpless and unconscious gesture, like the graffiti inscriptions on a prison wall, but it is a decisive act, in which the two figures of the landscape inscribe themselves into the image as a mark. They are no longer in a forced position of fixed contemplation. Others may be fated to remain passively in the face of the inscriptions on the wall, but they have claimed their right to define the traces as they are written on the screen.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: EPILOGUE: THE TERROR OF THE TEXT IN 23 AND DIE  
DRITTE GENERATION**

On Thursday May 23, 1991, an advertisement in the regional Hamburg classifieds of the resolutely left-wing daily newspaper *die tageszeitung* proclaimed the following cryptic message on page 22: “Hagbard Celine .. the greatest hacker of all time was stoked! His Judas is still callously spinning dance music records on NDR 2.”<sup>1</sup> No other information was conveyed, nor was there any other indication toward the ad’s origin or its composer. While such obscure fragments of information or pseudo-advertisements in open message boards were a common element in the establishment of a contrarian identity for the alternative newspaper, affectionately known as *die taz*, the bizarre paranoia of this anonymous rant would have nonetheless struck even jaded readers accustomed to the paper’s irreverent style. The announcement is remarkable for its impropriety in tone, its direct but futile and disproportionate rage, and its catachrestic rhetorical linkage of an injustice of betrayal in Biblical proportions with an unnamed disc jockey

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<sup>1</sup> In the original “Hagbard Celine ... der größte Hacker aller Zeiten wurde verheizt! Sein Judas legt immer noch kaltblütig Tanzmusik bei NDR 2 auf.” This advertisement was published in *taz-Hamburg* (i.e. *die tageszeitung – Hamburg*), Thursday, May 23, 1991, p. 22.

at the Northern German NDR 2, a public radio station mostly popular for its mixture of contemporary pop music paired with news and traffic information. Moreover, the ad conveys a particularly ominous linguistic register in its unequivocal use of the strictly militaristic term *verheizt* or “stoked.” Literally “spent or burnt up,” like coal shoveled into a railroad engine, the verb *verheizen* implies the meaningless military sacrifice and callous acceptance of human casualties in combat without any strategic gain or larger purpose to “stoke” the engine of battle.

This term, in conjunction with a charge that a popular radio personality is still coldheartedly pushing “dance music” on the airwaves, seems to constitute another catachrestic violation of idiom usage, since *Tanzmusik* connotes a kind of musty and anachronistic music, more suitably played by a ballroom orchestra of yesteryears, rather than the popular contemporary chart music fare NDR 2 is known for. The gloomy pronouncement, with its openly presumptuous aggression and its air of conspiratorial defamation, stands equally in marked contrast to the lofty, clear-eyed and witty coverage that the *taz* newspaper usually takes on in the service of information and enlightenment. What gets linked here is a dark reminder of the futility of a machinery of war that sacrifices a nation’s best and brightest, its “chosen ones,” with a sense that the traitors and perpetrators of this atrocity are currently still occupying positions in the media in order to lull a populace into the stupefying diversions and digressions of easy listening music. Despite its ranting character, however, the advertisement seems curiously appropriate, albeit anachronistic, since its tone of desperation invokes a familiar trope that would be fitting to the rhetoric of rebellion by the West German youth at the time of the Oberhausen Manifesto and reminiscent of the historical charges against the silent complicity by their parents’ generation of the Adenauer years.

In this sense, the paranoid charges voiced in the advertisement employ a very conventional and easily-invoked figure of betrayal and despair, which is most vividly epitomized by the criticism surrounding the post-war West German careers of public figures implicated in the Nazi regime such as Hans Globke, Kurt-Georg Kiesinger or Hans Karl Filbinger. The fact that the careers of these respected public officials in the service of the construction of the Federal Republic of Germany continued through the post-war years, even as their bureaucratic complicity as civil servants, party functionaries, and judges in the service of the Nazi regime became public knowledge, provided the source of vehement discontent and the foundation of much justified anger in the political debates of the time. The confused rhetoric that animates the urgency of the advertisement, therefore, builds on a heightened awareness of these sensitive political circumstances, but continues to rely on juxtaposing terms that do not seem to belong together categorically and thus attempts to make evident structures of power that are still in place in contemporary society through such violent catachreses.

Such charges against political personalities who remain in power, however, are already in place in early films such as *The Murderers Are Among Us* and will be revisited in later films such as Wolfgang Staudte's remarkable *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt* or even *Heimat*. If its trope in the rhetoric of political arguments sheds light on the discursive manner by which public figures were allowed to remain in power despite their dubious and complicit activities in the past, the advertisement also provides a comfortable reassurance that the structures of power remain in place in familiar configurations at the same time. That is, the appearance of the ad functions as a form of arcane commemoration by which the fact that nothing has changed is registered, recognized and remembered. The act of commemorating a certain "Hagbard Celine," in this sense, is achieved in the guise of a graffiti-like intervention on the newspaper page; while

nothing can be changed about the circumstances of his death, the ad's composers have to console themselves with the futile and fleeting act of announcing a sentiment that echoes *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* once more as a brief but willful inscription into the quotidian pages of a newspaper. This might certainly not be significant enough to make note of, much like graffiti in general constitutes a kind of visual noise that need not be registered consciously, were it not for the form by which this fragment of information is conveyed. Moving from very specific circumstances that are only alluded to and ominously hinted at to the pronouncement of a larger category of truth, the ad serves as an inscription or memento, albeit one for which the emblematic image has yet to be supplied again, but which is already in place nonetheless within a public memory that is equipped to supplement the corresponding image. In its formal appearance as a marginal pronouncement, the advertisement commemorates the idea that a young martyr has been sacrificed by powers that operate through the means of a pervasive popular culture, and it hints at a revolutionary counterforce that has taken note of this phenomenon. Moreover, the fact that this revolutionary struggle has already found its first victims is commemorated through the martial rhetoric of the battlefield. More importantly, the advertisement constructs the hope of an audience. It aspires to find its readers who can understand the coded message and, presumably, take appropriate "action," but there is no indication what this action could entail.

This mechanism of supplementation functions as the obverse of the power relations that writing in film imposes. The fragmentary and ephemeral appearance of the advertisement, embedded within the magnitude and flow of information dissemination of a daily newspaper, does not guarantee a proper recipient, nor does the arcane information that is conveyed provide any clues as to how it must be decoded. Nonetheless, it affirms a mode of knowing that through

its cryptic form imposes a foreboding premonition, but through its appearance asserts the common dilemma of justice and retribution. The message thus stands as a fragment of paranoid knowledge rendered as common sense, namely that a nefarious power is located in local media and that ingenious rebels who challenge such power are sacrificed. Its cryptic nature appeals to a particular mode of philosophical thought by which common sense is affirmed, which Gilles Deleuze has postulated as a form of presupposition. In such an act of presupposition, an implicit postulate yields what Deleuze calls “a pre-philosophical and natural Image of thought, borrowed from the pure element of common sense,” by which thought is affirmed to have “an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true.”<sup>2</sup> In its desire to offer a semblance of the truth, this postulate merely achieves a replication that subjects any mode of thinking to itself *as* a postulate, so that the condition of this thought becomes an assertion that “everybody knows and is presumed to know what it means to think.”<sup>3</sup> The principle of this mode of thought is what Deleuze terms recognition. Recognition “provides a philosophical concept for the presupposition of a common sense” or, in other words, “it is the common sense become philosophical.”<sup>4</sup>

This is by no means a cause for celebration for Deleuze. Rather, such a mode of recognition stands as a “hindrance to philosophy,”<sup>5</sup> or, even worse, as a sign of a “disturbing complacency,”<sup>6</sup> because what it achieves is a mere repetition of an orthodoxy, where the “form of recognition has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will

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<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

never inspire anything but conformities.”<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the cryptic message conveys but its own emphasis within this mode of recognition, while hinting at a force that is at least capable of recognizing the structures of power that are in place. But in its enactment it remains a futile gesture. It repeats the terror by which it is itself haunted by replicating a sense of alarm and urgency. Thus, in terms of Deleuze’s conformities, the form of the message remains welded to the very structures of power it purports to address. Yet, paradoxically, in this convergence lies a potential for a true philosophical explication or, in Deleuze’s words, it becomes an example of a “discordant harmony,” from which emerges “something which is communicated from one faculty to another, but is metamorphosed and does not form a common sense.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than providing another instance in which recognition is the mode that affirms a common sense as conformity and which prevents the engendering of true thinking, this “something” works in opposition to a clarity of form and yields ideas that create a “para-sense which determines only the communication between disjointed faculties.”<sup>9</sup>

The value of this presence lies in the fact that it can account for a means to engender a kind of thinking whereby thought is not yet fixed as an image in conformity but rather a difficulty that allows for thinking outside of such a category as error, which would only be “the reverse of a rational orthodoxy, still testifying on behalf of that from which it is distanced.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, the work of thinking the difficulty of a thought without image offers a way out of the constraints of recognition and yields new directions of thinking, such as the one offered by

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

schizophrenia, for example, which, Deleuze takes pains to note, is “not only a human fact but also a possibility for thought.”<sup>11</sup> Within these possibilities of difficulty in thinking, there is a “fortunate” side to this difficulty because difficulty “is not a *de facto* state of affairs but a *de jure* structure of thought.”<sup>12</sup> This difficulty needs to be pursued in the service of a “new principle which does not allow itself to be represented,”<sup>13</sup> that is, a thought without image.

This also serves as the problem that the advertisement commemorating Hagbard Celine inevitably points to. In this respect, the advertisement provides an instance where Deleuze’s critique of recognition is applicable. The understanding of power that the advertisement professes does not seem to generate any new mode of thinking. Rather, it affirms an apparently commonsensical observation as paranoia. And yet, although the structure of the announcement appeals to a conformity in recognition, albeit a conformity that heralds its own subversive status in relation to power, its effect remains profoundly disturbing as it reverses one of the postulates which recognition normally yields, namely as the function of “modality” or of “solutions,” i.e. “problems being materially traced from propositions, or, indeed, formally defined by the possibility of their being solved.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the opposite is the case, because, while the paranoid structure of thought offered here conforms to conventional registers of allegorical sacrifice, to biblical references, and to a conception of popular culture as an insidious force – which in and of themselves are very common images of thought – there is nonetheless no solution that this fragment of knowledge explicitly or implicitly provides. It remains suspended between any

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 167.



potential modalities of resolution except for the premise of its very recognition as such. The act of recognition invoked in this particular piece of writing may fail to fulfill its pronounced goal of intervention in structures of power, but it can remain and stand as a merely differentiating force from the coherence on the pages of the newspaper. In doing so, it remains a futile gesture, but a gesture nonetheless.

The background for this embittered cry for emblemizing the sacrifice of “the greatest hacker of all times” involves a complicated tale of conspiracy theories, espionage, and unauthorized computer security breaches surrounding the figure of Karl Koch, a rebellious youngster who had died two years earlier to the day of the advertisement’s publication, on the twenty-third of May, 1989.<sup>15</sup> His nom de guerre served as a reference to the character Hagbard Celine, taken from the 1975 occult science fiction opus *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, an underground classic of which Timothy Lear reportedly has proclaimed that it was “more important than *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.”<sup>16</sup> In this trilogy, Hagbard Celine is the name of a genius and rebel submarine commander who battles a global conspiracy by a cabal of illuminati to unleash nuclear World War III. Koch was fascinated by the book and had memorized large passages of it by heart and was able to recite them as if they were chapter and verse. As a minor cause célèbre, Koch made his name in the emerging underground computer hacking scene of West Germany in the 1980s, but for a while he caused panic and consternation among the authorities and in the West German media when his hacking skills were

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<sup>15</sup> As the film suggests, Karl Koch attributed great significance to the number 23 in a delusional state of apophenia, so the fact that the advertisement appeared on p. 22 acquires fictional or factual significances only if the proximity to the page number 23 indicates the possibility that its authors had requested that it be put on the subsequent page.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy: The Eye in the Pyramid, The Golden Apple, and Leviathan* (New York: MFJ Books, 1975), frontispiece.

ted to the KGB to whom he had solicited classified information obtained from the US Department of Defense and other highly sensitive computer systems. A confused and disturbed teenager, Karl Koch did not conform to the image of the sophisticated high-tech anarchist who moves through global network systems with stealth and determination. Instead, the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* called him an “eternal loser” and stated that rather than being a skillful cyber-guerrilla, Koch was merely an “orphan from a broken home, a high-school dropout and drug-addled computer freak, who for the sake of his hobby ... burned through his inheritance of 100,000 Deutschmark within a year-and-a-half.”<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, Karl Koch managed to rise to considerable fame in hacker circles and was soon anointed to the “ranks of the hacker elites,” as Koch himself described it.<sup>18</sup> He was especially revered by members of the so-called Chaos Computer Club or CCC, a network association of hackers and computer experts founded in Berlin in 1981, but active throughout Germany and in the region of Hamburg and Northern Germany in particular, whose stated mission was to offer “reconnaissance missions at the edge of invisibility” in the service of the “new human right to the free exchange of information.”<sup>19</sup> Koch was born in 1965 and grew up in Hannover, a city in the north of West Germany close to the East-West German border. The city was almost completely destroyed during the war and so became a show case for the specific

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<sup>17</sup> “Alle großen Anarchisten starben am 23.,” *Der Spiegel*, 24 (June 12, 1989): 87 - 94. Such characterizations elicited a vehement defense by Koch’s computer allies and friends. For some interesting documentation in this regard, albeit some of it tinged with sophomoric pathos or melodramatic fervor or both, see for example the material offered on the following websites <http://www.hagbard-celine.de/> and <http://www.schaechl.de/kk/>.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hans-Christian Schmid and Michael Gutmann, *23: Die Geschichte des Hackers Karl Koch* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

brand of the West German architecture of reconstruction and city planning that favored wide thoroughfares and bland functional high-rises. His mother died of cancer when he was 11 and from early adolescence on, Karl Koch had continuous and vehement clashes with his father, an editor at a Hannover newspaper. Despite academic difficulties in school, he became very active in high school politics and student government and frequently traveled to other cities to participate in leftwing demonstrations and antigovernment political protests. During this time, he began to experiment with drugs and found his calling in computer hacking, an activity that appealed to his conspiratorial sensibility and active imagination fostered by the *Illuminatus* novels.

While his hacking skills were celebrated in the circles of the Chaos Computer Club, Karl Koch became increasingly delusional and paranoid, to the point that he imagined to have caused the nuclear disaster in the Chernobyl power plant in 1986. He also spoke repeatedly of his awareness that he was ill, a state of mind which led him to state his intent to “get an atom bomb and blow himself up on the top of the World Trade Center.”<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, his circle of friends grew because he had inherited a large sum of money from his father who had died when Karl was nineteen. He was hospitalized in various mental institutions, but in spite of his incapacitating mental illness and increasingly dangerous drug use, he managed to attract the attentive interest of the Soviet embassy in East Berlin and provided them repeatedly with information obtained by his hacking activities before the German federal police intervened. When the sensational news of Koch’s criminal computer enterprises was made public, he was contacted by a number of journalists. Of these, one particular journalist, who worked for a youth program at the NDR public radio station, was later alleged to have bribed and hectored Koch to perform illegal hacks,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

so that he could then cover these for his radio programs. His notoriety and momentary fame did not prevent Koch from descending even deeper into his paranoid delusions. On May 23, 1989, a few months after he joined the Church of Latter Day Saints and having informed some of his acquaintances about his recent revelatory contacts with alien life forms, he drove to a secluded forest area where he set himself on fire. His body was only found a week later, burned beyond recognition.

Hacking, writes McKenzie Wark, should not be misconstrued by reducing the activities of hackers to a “mere criminality” as the embodiment of the “new form of the juvenile delinquent, or nihilist vandal, or servant of organized crime,” or even merely to a “harmless subculture.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, Wark understands “hacking” as the definitive mode of expression for the “information proletariat”<sup>22</sup> that offers a revolutionary potential, because “to the hacker there is always a surplus of possibility expressed in what is actual, the surplus of the virtual,” so that hacking becomes the ability “to release the virtual into the actual, to express the difference of the real.”<sup>23</sup> It is in this mode of production that “hacking” should be understood, because what it produces is not mere information as such. Rather, the “hacker class produces the possibility of production.”<sup>24</sup> In this respect, Wark charts out a means to identify a revolutionary potential in the conditions of actuality without subjugating it to an instrumentalization through a power that Wark calls the “vectoralist class,” a class so defined “because they control the vectors along

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<sup>21</sup> McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

which information is abstracted.”<sup>25</sup> These vectors define the fault lines of the struggle for information between creative expression and its appropriation as intellectual property.

The advertisement that commemorates Hagbard Celine and the activities that he enjoyed pursuing might therefore be more productively classified as an attempt to intervene in this struggle through a mode of recognition and thereby create the conditions for a new production of meaning. In fact, the original obituary by Karl Koch’s friends, which also appeared in the *taz*, is even more pronounced in this regard. With the name Karl Koch followed by “hagbard” [*sic*] in parentheses,<sup>26</sup> his sister Christine and “his friends” as the undersigned announce his death and state their “anger” about it by writing that they are “sure that Karl would still be alive had he not been driven to death by the protective forces of the state and the media.”<sup>27</sup> While less dramatic in its announcement than the advertisement that followed two years later, the tone is equally indignant in its elegiac attempt to find a meaning in Koch’s death. The confluence of the “protective forces” of the state and the media as ultimately pursuing the same interests in a conflict that sacrifices young idealists as martyrs might originate from a more melodramatic imagination, but it is important to note that in melodrama the relation between the individual and the social order is encapsulated. Here, as well, this relation is articulated, but, while it fails to produce a new dimension of meaning, the obituaries can nonetheless indicate how their attempt to produce meaning must be interpreted. In other words, the enigmatic pronouncements that speak of the threat by the forces of the state and the forces of the media can be decoded, that is, a

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> The insistence on violating the German orthographic convention of capitalizing proper names and nouns was a typographical mark of the RAF, “the Red Army Faction” terrorist group, in their written statements and missives.

<sup>27</sup> Obituary in *taz*, reprinted in Hans-Christian Schmid and Michael Gutmann, 23, p. 137.

name can be attributed to the disc jockey who has betrayed “Hagbard” as the journalist who exploited his talents<sup>28</sup> and the advertisement can serve to indicate a counterforce that remains in the shadows, but the information that is reproduced falls into a paranoid variety within the categories of recognition.

The young TV and documentary director Hans-Christian Schmid had already worked on the subject matter of Karl Koch’s tragic circumstances when he graduated from the Munich Film Academy and returned to his drafts and treatments for the development of his second feature film after the highly successful intergenerational stoner comedy *Nach Fünf im Urwald* (1995). Together with his collaborator Michael Gutmann he scripted a screenplay that followed the circumstances of Koch’s life and death fairly meticulously and both were very concerned that the production design be historically accurate. Their insistence on this aspect of the film resulted in the use of documentary material in order to have the film reflect “images that were embedded in the collective consciousness” of the period.<sup>29</sup> However, these images were then dramaturgically integrated into the subjective and mental “explanatory model of the world” that the character

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<sup>28</sup> Hans-Christian Schmid and Michael Gutmann, for example, refrain from naming the journalist and give him a pseudonym for their interviews with him. The journalist has stated in these interviews that for a while he annually received an envelope with some dirt and the words “this is ground from Karl’s grave. We hope that your guilty conscience will eat you up eventually.” Cf. Schmid and Gutmann, 23, p. 133. He suspects that the sender of the envelope and the advertisements are the work of Karl’s friends, but he has no proof. For such reasons, which also imply a misguided sense of continuing anger, the film fictionalizes most characters, with the exception of Karl Koch, into composites for “dramaturgical reasons.” With little effort online or in archival work, however, the name of the NDR journalist and the likely names of Karl’s friends responsible for the advertisement can be ascertained through the documentation of the original sources available or simply by informed conjecture.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Karl Koch employs.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the team of Schmid and Gutmann were fascinated by the possibility to create new markers of identification for the state of West Germany, since the narrative posed the difficulty of having to avoid the “clichés and the stories that take place in the elegant Munich or the high bourgeoisie of Hamburg.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, because the politicized time of the early 1980s had not been frequently represented in the cinema, both Schmid and Gutmann found that in the locations of Hannover, which they saw as epitomizing the average sphere of life in the post-war era, the particular quality of the “funk of ordinary West Germany” or, in German, the *Mief*, was actually discernible and even “palpable”<sup>32</sup> on the screen. The film was well received both critically and popularly in Germany and was shown in North America at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1998 but has not been distributed in the U.S. to date.

Sabine Hake has called *23* a film that is particularly noteworthy because of its ability to envision the nomadic constructions of cultural identity outside of and beyond entrenched categories by “[e]xtending ... reflections on homelessness into the world of new information technologies.”<sup>33</sup> In this assessment, she echoes McKenzie Wark’s understanding of the hacker culture as an extension of the information proletariat which challenges manifestations of the state. Wark builds on Giorgio Agamben’s notion that “the state can recognize any claim for identity ... [b]ut what the state cannot tolerate in any way is that singularities form a community without claiming an identity, that human beings co-belong without a representable condition of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 192.

belonging.”<sup>34</sup> By making explicit the link to representation as the limitations of the state, Wark asserts that the hacker class enables its potential through abstractions and thus continuously eludes identification, because “it is not hackers who poison the waters, or enrich the plutonium, or genetically modify the crops, or inculcate the dangerous creeds, but it is hackers who hack these bright new possibilities into being.”<sup>35</sup>

The implications of this mode of creating new possibilities find a visual correspondence in the film *23*, which thematizes both the dangers and the potential inherent in this form of labor while celebrating the difficulty of defining the “singularity” of the hacker Karl Koch in his struggle to battle his actual and imaginary foes. In fact, Agamben’s assessment of the topicality and “disquieting” prophetic power of Guy Debord’s works, the analyses of which “history seems to have committed itself to relentlessly confirm,”<sup>36</sup> can be extended to the film as well, since it offers an example of Debord’s ninth maxim in *The Society of the Spectacle* that declares “[i]n a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.”<sup>37</sup> Agamben locates another possibility in the condition of the spectacle, namely the fact that “the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility.”<sup>38</sup> The basis of the ultimate condition through

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<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 14. (Emphasis in original.) A transcription of the book on the website [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org) gives the entry, translated under the pseudonym “Black & Red,” as follows: “In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false.” Cf. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 83.



which the spectacle is experienced is, according to Agamben, now coming to its final conclusion in a “phase, in which language not only constitutes itself as an autonomous sphere, but also no longer reveals anything at all – or better yet, it reveals the nothingness of all things.”<sup>39</sup> At this point, “language thus acquires, for the last time, the unspoken power to claim a historical age and a state for itself: the age of the spectacle, or the state of fully realized nihilism.”<sup>40</sup> Hans-Christian Schmid’s film *23* begins with a credit sequence that provides a tangible visualization of this discursive alienation created by the experience of language in the age of the spectacle. While it demonstrates the randomness by which any truth can be crystallized and established around pieces and fragments of information, it also makes visible the mode by which such clusters of meaninglessness can be rearticulated in order to derive a sense of force. As the opening of the film makes clear, this force is at work and needs to be harnessed in order to expose both its destructive and creative potential. The labor process involved in doing so is analogous to what Wark establishes as the task and potential achievements of the hacker class.

While credit sequences are generally not discussed in relation to the cinematic image, unless they are analyzed as a contribution to auteurist cinema such as the work of Saul Bass for Alfred Hitchcock’s films, the opening credit sequence of *23* demonstrates how vital the credit sequence can be in order to emblemize the ideas that will be introduced in the filmic images to come. Moreover, the credit sequence brings into relief some of the thematics in terms of a visual language that transcends the boundaries usually ascribed to the difference between image and text. *23* opens with a black background, onto which gradually, and at first randomly, small-print newspaper headlines are superimposed in white, taking their place at various positions within the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 84 – 85.

screen. After the production company's logo of Clausen & Wöbke has disappeared, the headline "TWA flight 800: Bomb explodes in row 23" initiates the subsequent sequence of newspaper headline fragments. Then the following lines are interspersed and fade in onto the screen: "B 23 is Germany's deadliest road," "genetic material on 23 chromosomes," "code '23' in Morse code means communications breakdown," and "Karpov, Kasparov: check mate in the 23rd round." Once the pattern of the reoccurrence of the number 23 is established, the next pieces of information appear almost simultaneously, blurring and superimposing themselves over the previous sentences. "Julius Caesar was felled by 23 knife stabs," "Olof Palme murdered: the deadly shots occurred at 23:23 hours," "230 injured at the Discotheque La Belle," are announced and linger on in quick succession, until the director's name appears in larger print when the final two headlines are added. "Giacomo [*sic*] Savonarola was executed on May 23, 1498"<sup>41</sup> and "23. 5. 1989: Richard von Weizsäcker reconfirmed in his post."

As the director's name fades from the lines again, the headlines are repeated in such fast succession, once more interspersed with the number 23 flashing rapidly onto the screen, and are multiplied until an information overload sets in and the lines blur into the visual equivalent of white noise. From this grainy televisual white noise, however, a larger pattern becomes gradually discernible, as the pixelated white lettering increases in volume and clusters into the shape of the large number 23 that begins to fill the screen. An aural fragment gradually increases in volume, as we hear a female voice, which can be identified by audience members versed in German political minutiae as that of Rita Süßmuth, who in her function as president of the West-German parliament, addresses someone and asks whether the nomination will be accepted. With this the

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<sup>41</sup> Correct is Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498), the influential heretic who urged repentance and rejected the rule of the Medici, who was tortured, hanged and burned, in this successive order, by the citizens of Florence.

screen dissolves into a television screen on which Richard von Weizsäcker accepts his reconfirmation for a second term as President of Germany.

This amazingly complex credit sequence bombards the viewer with a multitude of information that can barely be processed in time until the television news coverage of Weizsäcker's reelection continues the credit sequence with actual images rather than the abstracted representation of numbers and letters. In its intensity, the sequence offers a compendium of important and marginal knowledge that weaves together political fragments that may at some time have had an urgency as quotidian media events, such as the crash of flight TWA 800 from New York to Paris off the coast of Long Island. This catastrophe occurred at a time when airline crashes were still considered highly anomalous and were not readily available for the public imagination as potential disasters. Almost immediately after it happened the crash ignited competing models of explanation, with some credible sources stating, contrary to the official explanation of a fuel tank malfunction, that the commercial aircraft had been shot down accidentally by a US Navy missile. While this piece of information is included for its numerical value of the number of victims, other fragments relate to the circumstances of the times during which the film takes place, such as the bombing of the Berlin nightclub Discotheque La Belle, a place popular with American soldiers stationed in the American sector of Berlin. At the time, the La Belle bomb attack was rumored to have been carried out by Libyan agents smuggled in through East Berlin, a speculation that was later confirmed as accurate.

The two most portentous fragments of information, however, relate to the date of May 23, or 23. 5. in the German notation, in such a way that they are imbued to carry a semblance of significance. Five centuries are spanned between the execution of Girolamo Savonarola and the beginning of Richard von Weizsäcker's second term as German President, both of which

occurred on May 23, and which are therefore asserted to carry significance. Von Weizsäcker was certainly a well-respected conservative politician, who, in his figure-head function that the German Presidency connotes, will chiefly be remembered for introducing a nuanced discourse and level-headed approach to the subject of how Germany should understand the end of World War II as a day of liberation and not a day of defeat. Here, however, he is equated in historical terms with the theocratic prophecies of Savonarola. Savonarola is an important figure in the history of the Renaissance because he attempted to introduce a return to fundamental Biblical values in an increasingly secularized Florence by imposing the “bonfire of the vanities,” in which “idle” and secular art objects were destroyed, before he himself was excommunicated and executed.<sup>42</sup> His inclusion among Libyan secret agents and Berlin nightclubs, a post-war German presidency, and chess masters, suggests a secret history, a history which can only be discerned by a paranoid imagination, that is, within an apophenic pattern recognition of the white noise of information overload.

The patterns that are created here establish a false history in which disparate elements are fused together to form a “secret” configuration. At the beginning of the film it is the film viewer who is posited to recognize this pattern in a reverse movement, whereby the individual strands of information and knowledge stand on their own until they form the larger cluster of the number and can no longer be discerned as discrete, only as an accumulation of visual noise. Inasmuch as credit sequences are taken to introduce the thematics or tone of a film, here, too, the sequence

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<sup>42</sup> We can assume that in a film which has obviously taken great pains in its production design to recreate the time and place of its settings as accurately as possible, the assignation of the first name of Savonarola as “Giacomo” instead of “Girolamo” is an unfortunate and erroneous misidentification, but this occurrence nonetheless befits the film’s larger emphasis on fragments of information and elements of truth rather than veracity itself.

serves a pedagogical function in order to alert the viewer to the mode of imagination necessary for the understanding of the film to come. The credit sequence thus initiates a sense of counter-history, one which could productively be called a myth-creation. Here Carlo Ginzburg in his discussion on the history of the term “myth” as a discursive category offers some useful insights. In tracing the changing definitions of myths, Ginzburg demonstrates that the Aristotelian interpretations of Boethius engender an understanding of myth that opens up a “hitherto uncharted terrain ... for exploration,”<sup>43</sup> namely the creation of a fictitious space in which a new realm of fiction is established. In this realm, a category is constructed as a “construction that, within a well-defined sphere, made operative a nonexistent reality,”<sup>44</sup> much in the same sense that poetry “constitutes a reality that is true to all intents and purposes, but not true in the literal sense.”<sup>45</sup>

As Ginzburg traces the functions of myth, he determines that it operates on the oppositional premise “that the majority of mankind, in thrall to passion and ignorance, can be held in bounds only thanks to religion or to the myths introduced by the wise minority.”<sup>46</sup> This dialectic between the majority or the masses and a leading minority that controls them through the exertion of myth as a power function Ginzburg locates specifically in the example given by Machiavelli, in which he observes that the Florentine citizenship, despite its urbane sophistication, falls prey to the persuasive powers of Savonarola.<sup>47</sup> Savonarola’s

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<sup>43</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Myth: Distance and Deceit,” in *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

fundamentalism, in other words, is the necessary mode by which the masses can be controlled through the generation of myths. It is therefore all the more significant that the figure of Savonarola be invoked in the credit sequence of 23 in conjunction with the figure of the West German president. A curious dynamic is introduced here, whereby the invocation of Savonarola's execution date and von Weizsäcker's second inauguration, both hints at and obscures a mythical history. The problem, however, is not that myths provide a sense of false consciousness or that they stand in opposition to an official history. Rather, Ginzburg proves that issues of power distribution are related to the question of how myths are established and that these are not necessarily hidden. For this Ginzburg includes an extended passage from Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*,<sup>48</sup> in which Benjamin records a June 1936 article by Jean de Lignières that states that "a shrewd observer remarked, one day, that fascist Italy was run like a large newspaper ... with an adroit and insistent orientation of the reader toward certain inordinately enlarged aspects of social life."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the result of this state of affairs is that fascism is not defined by secrecy but in fact by the way in which information is regulated or, in other words, "that fascist regimes are publicity regimes."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>49</sup> Ginzburg offers his own translation from Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann. The passage above is taken from Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press), 2002, p. 768.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Indeed, the real powers of fascism move inscriptions into the realm of the real, as the mark of the *Judenstern* and the "bonfire of the books" demonstrated. These inscriptions are by now dispersed but still legible on our television screens as "crawl." And there may not be as much of a distance as we would like to imagine between the signs that proclaim "Arbeit macht frei" at the gates of the concentration camp Theresienstadt and "Honor bound to defend freedom," the motto of the JTF-GITMO in Guantánamo Bay.

This understanding of information and its distribution as a contested political dimension is what both McKenzie Wark and Hans-Christian Schmid emphasize. The exertion of power by the state is not carried out in secret, although significant aspects of its power might be made invisible, but it is rather spelled out in the open. The disturbing dimension of 23 lies not in the fact that Karl Koch became delusional to the point that he fantasized his own persecution, but rather that there were no other imaginary means of solution available to him except for the recognition of his suffering as a victim of the forces of the state, in lieu of any other resolutions. The hacker in this film thus becomes another allegory for suffering. He imagines the modes of resistance in relation to the state until his sacrifice becomes “Christlike” in a state of victimhood. In Koch’s case, at least, this desire found its completion by his few disciples, who make their presence known in the marginal advertisement on a newspaper page in a vain gesture of resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Gilles Deleuze takes seriously the strands of “false movements” in the New German Cinema by explicitly invoking the title of Wim Wenders’ *Falsche Bewegung* (1975) in this respect. He notes that there is a “constantly variable link”<sup>52</sup> in the post-war German cinema which oscillates in an “oppressive, useless, and unsummonable time”<sup>53</sup> through the movements that depict, “from one pole to the other, the powers of the false which weave a narration.”<sup>54</sup> The

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<sup>51</sup> Now relegated to the internet, of course, where there are a number of sites dedicated to Koch. In addition, there are many sites that pursue Koch’s apophenia, or recognition of meaningful patterns in random data, in the numerology of the number 23, which gives the film its title.

<sup>52</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 136.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

text that is “woven” here by the movement of the shuttle is a machinic text that inscribes its own repetition. The final images, then, of 23 depict Karl Koch’s face behind the windshield of a car, in which the movement of sunlight is mirrored and refracted, driving down a country road towards his demise, as the camera pulls out into the skies above in an extreme long shot and leaves the car to its movement below. Deleuze would certainly have noted the image repetition here as a false movement through which the film replicates and bounces back to the other pole, the first images of Volker Schlöndorff’s film *Circle of Deceit* (1981, *Die Fälschung*), which depict a man, “caught in a chain of forgers, blankly watching the movement of a windscreen wiper.”<sup>55</sup>

Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s 1979 grotesque film on the triangulated conjunction of terrorism, capitalism, and the media, *The Third Generation*, derives its impulse from a more immediate urgency of disentangling the network in which the relations of power are inscribed and replicated. The title, he states, indicates a generation of terrorists that differentiates itself from its earlier manifestations by the fact that they are no longer motivated by ideals or ideology or the fact that they are willing to defend and rationalize these motives so thoroughly that they become criminalized, but rather by a self-serving and pointless perpetuation of violence. However, Fassbinder also insists that equally one could name as the “third generation” those who upheld the consistency of the “German bourgeoisie” from 1848 to 1933, as well as the way in which “our grandfathers... experienced the Third Reich” and “our fathers” who squandered

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



away an “opportunity after the war to set up a state that could have been more humane and free than any had ever been before.”<sup>56</sup>

Fassbinder called the impetus for his film a “simple” one, because, as he says, it has “one starting point in the imagination: that is, that in the last analysis terrorism is an idea generated by capitalism to justify better defense measures to safeguard capitalism.”<sup>57</sup> The film constructs a continuous barrage of writing, sound, noise, and competing channels of media to replicate a form of terrorist assault that is created by the media, since, as Fassbinder explained, that “it’s the media, which constantly hammer away at people, who in the meantime have become so hooked and helpless that by now they can’t even manage to push a button to get some peace and quiet.”<sup>58</sup> Fassbinder discusses the theme of the film under the category of the relation between reality and the media, whom he accuses of “sloppy thinking habits.”<sup>59</sup> His film attempts to counter these thinking habits by a specific intervention into the triangulated configurations of power in an appeal to the civic and civil duty of the viewer as a way for the individual citizen to formulate concrete political perspectives on the basis of the exposure to his film.

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<sup>56</sup> Rainer Werner Fassbinder, “*The Third Generation*” in *The Anarchy of the Imagination. Interviews. Essays. Notes*, ed. Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing, trans. Krishna R. Winston (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> “[T]his is the only way we can do films here: by making them without worrying about losing money’: A Conversation with Wolfram Schütte about *The Third Generation*, Cinematic Politics, and a Strategy against Resignation,” in Rainer Werner Fassbinder. *The Anarchy of the Imagination*. p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>59</sup> Rainer Werner Fassbinder. “*The Third Generation*” in *The Anarchy of the Imagination.*, p. 129.

Moreover, the challenge to the legitimacy of state through a senseless terrorism, or as Fassbinder calls it, “adventures experienced in a sort of intoxication for their own sake,”<sup>60</sup> becomes such a futile gesture of self-assertion, which then allows the state to disperse any of its negating force into a mediated diversion for the benefit of its own consolidation. This inevitable mechanism, in fact, Fassbinder asserts angrily, “poses so little risk, even in the negative sense of being comprehensible,”<sup>61</sup> that one cannot but wonder whether the state did not itself engineer the threat of terrorism. “Why not?” asks Fassbinder grimly and enumerates other notorious instances of pretext such as the burning of the Reichstag, the Gleiwitz radio transmitter incident that precipitated the invasion of Poland, and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.<sup>62</sup> For Fassbinder this means that the contradictions become apparent in the West German model of democracy because of its reliance on authoritarian modes that serve as a continuation of disciplinary coercion from the Wilhelminian *Obrigkeitsstaat* onward. That is, the very mode in which the state exerts its power through the acceptance and consolidation of the legitimacy of its power continues to function in turn as a replication of a blind obedience which tolerates no dissent or challenges to structures of authority already in place. This mode is still in place where democracy is a system of government imposed onto the citizens of West Germany.

The film follows a band of bored terrorists, whose existence as a force is engineered and supported by the industrialist P.J. Lurz, played by Eddie Constantine. Lurz is interested in a continuous state of emergency, since this state of emergency predicates his business of computer surveillance and security equipment. For Timothy Corrigan, the film exemplifies the “spectacle

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

of narcissistic violations of... public space”<sup>63</sup> in order to demonstrate that the basis for these violations is the “democratic law of the state where the public spectacle of individual choice and freedom is built on and maintained by private violence, power, and greed.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, Lurz becomes himself the kidnapping victim of the terrorists and gamely assists them in their efforts to record the image of his face on a video camera. As he keeps reciting the lines they have given him, the terrorists attempt to inscribe the words “in the name of the people” in chalk as graffiti onto the wall behind his face.

Throughout the film, abject political and sexual graffiti inscriptions, taken from various actual locations of public lavatories in Berlin, are replicated as titles on the screen and provide the film with a semblance of structure. The opening titles, typed in machine-like succession over the images, declare that the film is “a comedy in six parts about the parlor games of cruelty and madness, similar to fairy tales told to children to help them bear their lives unto death.” Following this preface is the written announcement that the film is “dedicated to a true lover [*wahren Liebenden*], hence probably to no one.” Apparently, this was a “result of a misreading in the cutting room of ‘lover’ for ‘liberal.’”<sup>65</sup> In this misrecognition between the public and the

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<sup>63</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 213.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Jan Dawson, “The Sacred Terror: Shadows of Terrorism in the New German Cinema,” *Sight and Sound* 48, no. 4 (autumn 1979): p. 245. The dedication reads on the screen: “gewidmet einem wahren Liebenden als [*sic*] keinem wahrscheinlich?” Another error, this one typographical with “als” for “also,” makes this dedication even more complicated. The error exemplifies a subjunctive dimension, “dedicated to a true lover as probably no one,” but its original intention is to articulate as a question an address of political subjectivity: “Dedicated to a true liberal, thus probably no one?” This is followed by a public statement of the Social Democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt

private, addressed to everyone who views the screen, but spoken to someone who “probably” does not exist, a writing opens up that at this point can only be read by someone in the febrile grip of “archive fever,” as Jacques Derrida calls it.<sup>66</sup> As Derrida reminds us, this fictional figure suffering from “archive fever”<sup>67</sup> has “exhausted the science of archaeology” for a reconstruction of the past.<sup>68</sup> He has exhausted his skills of mastery in “the art of deciphering the most indecipherable, the most enigmatic graffiti”<sup>69</sup> in his searches for the traces on the walls in the ruins of Pompeii and he is no longer driven by a lifeless scientific “desire to decipher.”<sup>70</sup> Derrida emphasizes “the literal sense” of the imprint conveyed in this desire, namely the dream of “reliving” the steps and traces of others. This position is an “irreplaceable place,”<sup>71</sup> and so Derrida leaves us with the impossible in the moment of the trace. The figure finds himself, in the dream-like, singular condition “of the printer-printed, of the impression and the imprint, of the pressure and its trace in the unique *instant* where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other.”<sup>72</sup>

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who expresses his gratitude in retrospect to the German legal scholars for their willingness to refrain from challenging his actions against terrorism on a juridical or constitutional basis.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98. The figure is Norbert Hanold from Wilhelm Jensen’s 1903 novella *Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fancy*.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* (Emphasis in the original.)

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