

Das Wachsfigurenkabinett (Waxworks, Paul Leni, 1924)

Curated by Erik Born

Widely credited as either the first feature-length wax-museum horror film or the last gasp of Expressionist cinema, *Waxworks* needs to be understood as both a local product of visual culture and a contribution to the international tradition of vernacular modernism. While Leni's original aesthetic vision for the film filtered the Orientalist reception of *One Thousand and One Nights* through his experimental cabaret designs, Henrik Galeen's gothic script about a poet tasked with imagining background stories for a collection of aging wax figures provided a topical allegory about media competition and the transition from Imperial Germany to the Weimar Republic. For contemporary audiences, one of the film's main appeals, apart from its technical advances and special effects, consisted in watching celebrity actors Emil Jannings, Werner Krauss, and Conrad Veidt hold the pose of inanimate sculptures and then "come to life" before their very eyes. Conceptualized in 1920, shot in 1923, and released in 1924, *Waxworks* coincided not only with the obsolescence of Germany's once-beloved wax museum tradition, exemplified by the closing of Castan's Panopticum (1869–1922) and the Passage-Panoptikum (1888–1923), but also with the German film industry's brief flirtation with "Expressionism"—a label Leni rejected.

While the film later gained a cult following, it was initially dismissed as a mannerist failure, even a crass commercial attempt to piggyback on the industry's only previously marketable export. "*Waxworks* is Paul Leni's *Caligari* film. A latecomer. A *Stilfilm*," wrote Herbert Ihering in a review for the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (not included in this dossier). Seminal interpretations from Rudolf Kurtz, Siegfried Kracauer, and Lotte Eisner solidified *Waxworks*' position in the silent film canon, though they also cemented its status as a "dark" film that is difficult to square with its comedic elements and its unique approach to the question of film art. During production, Leni's film set constructions were exhibited at the *Große Berliner Kunstausstellung*, and advertisements promoted his "complete artistic direction" as part of the tradition of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and against his own aspirations for *Kleinkunst*. The unintended effect was to foreground only one aspect of Leni's multifaceted work in cabaret, illustration, advertising graphics, and interior design; reviewers reductively called him "the painter Leni."

In the context of the period's debates about the *Autorenfilm*, the filmmakers' unorthodox attempt to attribute their collaborative work—with Leni credited for artistic direction (*Regisseur*) and Leo Birinski for directing the actors (*Spielleiter*)—also backfired. For instance, one critic (not included in this dossier) mocked "Mister Lenibirinski, together with Mister Birinskileni (the former the *Regisseurspielleiter*, the latter the *Spielleiterregisseur*)." *Waxworks* exhibited a particularly fraught production process, including a lawsuit over script rights, an on-set explosion that injured some crew, and ongoing budget issues requiring the elimination of one crucial planned episode. During opening weeks, the film was shown with different reel orders, contributing to the audience's general sense of confusion and disappointment. Because there is no surviving negative of the version shown at the premiere, archival work is even more crucial.

A new reading of *Waxworks* might take seriously contemporary reviewers' questions about narrative coherence and aesthetic cohesion, as well as the horizon of expectations established by the waxworks tradition. Negotiating the potential of moving images to overpower the audience's imagination, Leni et al.'s anthology film presented a cautionary tale about the commercialization

of film style and the fetishization of the filmic image at the very moment when the still-new medium was searching for its own place in relation to older media of serial narration, visual variety, and immersive display. Like many films in the proto-horror genre, *Waxworks* exploited the boundaries between life and death by exploring the differences between moving and still images. Unconsciously thematizing the classic topoi of Expressionism, it presented a new take on the “revolt against the fathers” in terms of film’s competition with sculpture and literature. In this respect, the most important line for understanding *Waxworks* is one no longer found on any intertitles but frequently used in promotional materials: “Poet wanted...for an hourly wage.”

For further information and analysis, see Erik Born, “Cinema Panopticum: Wax, Work, *Waxworks*,” in *ReFocus: The Films of Paul Leni*, edited by Martin Norden and Erica Tortolani, 69–81 (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Dossier Sources

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Select Filmography

1. *Berlin, Panoptikum Friedrichstrasse* (Lumière Bros., 1896)
2. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920)
3. *Merry-Go-Round* (Erich von Stroheim, 1923)
4. *Rebus Films Nr. 1-8* (Paul Leni, 1925–28)
5. *The Man Who Laughs* (Paul Leni, 1928)

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