

# Weimar Film and Culture: Modernity as Catastrophe

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## Course description

*'Weimar Film and Culture' introduces Germany at its moment of greatest cultural crisis: between WWI and Nazism. This was a period caught between artistic experimentation (the Bauhaus, Neue Sachlichkeit, Expressionism and proletariat culture) and conservative reaction; it was politically volatile and psychologically intense, backward-looking (the cult of the Romantic, the gothic, decadence and the uncanny) but at the same time fascinated by machines, technology, and the future. After 1918 fashion changed; urban life changed; sex changed; even the body changed. Those who lived through the Weimar Republic spoke of chaos as an everyday condition. But the tug of war between the desire for liberation and the longing for order opened the door to an authoritarian backlash and a catastrophe that would rewrite German history.*

*We will study this dynamic period through its most famous 'symptoms': its movies. Weekly screenings feature classic silent and early sound films from directors like Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, G. W. Pabst, Leontine Sagan, with stars like Louise Brooks, Marlene Dietrich, Asta Nielsen, Emil Jannings and Peter Lorre.*

## Introduction

*Described as 'the most self-aware epoch in history' and the birthplace of a cynicism which has dominated the culture of modernity ever since, Weimar sponsored a film industry rivalling Hollywood's. With such directors as Lang, Pabst, Sagan and Murnau and films like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *Metropolis*, *The Blue Angel*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, 'M' and *Nosferatu*, it took the*

*lead in producing that fragile commodity, the art film. In its experiments with the shadowy mechanisms of the unconscious and the sensational effects of the 'fantastique', Weimar cinema developed a distinctive presence. At times politically subversive in its championship of 'low life' subjects and settings, at times wildly escapist and decadent, movie-making in this period was a social intervention as well as a populist entertainment. Sexually suggestive, morally ambiguous, at once Gothic and modernist, expressionistic and objective, the films of 1919–32 startled contemporary audiences and influenced later developments such as film noir and the French nouvelle vague. Weimar Cinema is the original fusion of High and Low Culture, of avant-garde ambitions and popular taste: as such, it is the exemplary period for an understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics and politics.*

*Weekly readings in the course will be drawn from classic and contemporary authors, critics, philosophers, journalists and film scholars, including Siegfried Kracauer, Peter Sloterdijk, Ernst Bloch, Anton Kaes, Lotte Eisner, Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, Ernst Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Tom Gunning, Patrice Petro, Susan Sontag, and Thomas Elsaesser. Our goals are to keep in focus the interaction between society and art, between 'high theory' and mass culture. Topics we consider include the impact of Freud's 'discovery of the unconscious'; the sexual reform movement; the ambivalent effects of mechanization of labor, private life, revolution, violence, the occult, trauma and aesthetics; the Weimar cult of androgyny and gender experimentation; class conflict and economic hardship, and the lingering wounds of Germany's wartime defeat and postwar humiliation. Students will be expected to watch all the assigned films on their own time, to keep a notebook of detailed notes and commentaries on the readings and cultures, to contribute short interventions and critical observations to group discussions (through the weekly 'Forum'), and to improve their analytic and interpretative writing by working on the essays assigned.*

#### **Course Goals:**

- To provide an in-depth critical knowledge of the controversies that surround the art and politics of Weimar Germany.
- To develop a familiarity with the work of the artists and film-makers of 1919-1931, their visual styles, their formal innovations, their psychological concerns, their social commitments and commentaries, and their impact on later developments (artistic and otherwise).
- To develop a language of analysis that sees film in history and history in film.

#### **Student Learning Objectives:**

By the end of the course students will demonstrate through their written essays:

1. Ability to speak and write critically about film as an intellectual project.
2. Knowledge of the historical period and its cultural trends, manifested in clear explanation of the specific strengths and weaknesses of the Republic as a political experiment

3. Critical and informed awareness of the interaction of art and social reality; ability to explain this at a higher level, supporting the explanation with concrete and continuous reference to the evidence.

4. Development of an advanced critical and comparative vocabulary. Confidence and fluency in discussing film as a cultural text, in applying critical methods, in organizing material and appraising arguments. Ability to present and justify a critical position, relating it in detail to the artwork or text.

## **Semester Schedule**

### **Required Books**

***Weimar Reader* (Course Pack pdf or reader) – Additional pdfs may be provided.**

### **Course Program: Screenings and Readings**

#### **Week 1: Berlin in the Twenties: the Myths, the Realists, the Expressionists, the Apocalypse**

Introductions. Class outline. A Revolution? What could go wrong?

The end of the German Empire; conflicts, street fighting and urban anarchy. A new Constitution, a fragile Republic. A decadent glamour, a culture of extremes, a polarized society. Germany the scapegoat? Militarism and war guilt. Political upheaval and the European condition.

Aesthetics on the warpath. Some nagging questions. Was Weimar Film 'expressionist'? What *was* expressionism? Ghostly investments, traumatic returns, shell shock and the 'machine-man': new interpretations. Foreseeing the future: Backlash against Expressionism, and the rise of the 'New Sobriety'. The 'myths' of Weimar - sexual decadence, the cynical subject, amorality.

**Discussion:** Weimar history, art and politics.

**Reading:** Eric Weitz, 'A Troubled Beginning' in *Weimar Germany*

**Film:** Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920)

#### **Week 2: Expressionism, Hypnosis, Horror**

**Reading:** Siegfried Kracauer, 'Caligari' in *From Caligari to Hitler*; Lotte Eisner, 'The Beginning of Expressionist Film' in *The Haunted Screen*; Stefan Andriopoulos, 'Suggestion, Hypnosis, and Crime'

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to readings in relation to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* that we watched in class. Also respond to Eric Weitz's chapter on Weimar history. Use the online forum for this week.

**Film:** Paul Wegener, *The Golem: How he Came into this World* (1920)

#### **Week 3: Mysticism and the Automaton: Technology, Architecture and the Occult**

**Reading:** Marco Biraghi and Michael Sullivan 'Poelzig and the Golem'; Rosa Fernández Urtasun 'From the golem to the robots: a visual evolution of a myth'; Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to reading and film

**Film:** F. W. Murnau, *Nosferatu* (1922)

#### **Week 4: Traumatic Neurosis, War, Horror**

**Reading:** Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 87-130 ('The Return of the Undead')

**Supplement:** Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 24-27; Ernst Simmel, 'War Neurosis'

**Film:** Fritz Lang, *Mabuse the Gambler* part 1 (1922) (part 2 encouraged but optional)

**Week 5: *Mabuse the Gambler*: The Law and how to transgress it: crime, gambling, sex, power, hypnosis, disguise, and other pleasures of the hyper-inflation, Lang's 'Image of Time'.**

**Discussion:** Portrait of Weimar Berlin, Social and Political Conflict, Crime, Economic Collapse

**Reading:** 'On the Margins of the Law: Vice, Crime, and the Social Order' from *Weimar Republic Source Book*; Tom Gunning, 'Fritz Lang Dr. Mabuse the Gambler: Grand Enunciator of the Weimar Era', 87-116; Peter Sloterdijk, 'The Weimar Symptom: Models of Consciousness in German Modernity' and 'Weimar Crystallization: Transition of a Period from Recollection into History' from *Critique of Cynical Reason* (pp. 384-390)

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to reading

**Film:** G. W. Pabst, *Secrets of the Soul* (1926)

**Week 6: Psychoanalysis, Hypnotism, Experiments with the Soul**

**Reading:** Sigmund Freud, *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1924); Veronica Fuechtner, *Berlin Psychoanalytic* (intro)

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to readings and films

**Film:** Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1927)

**To watch at home:** F. W. Murnau, *The Last Man* (1924)

**Week 7: Weimar Then and Now: Afterlife of Crisis, Weimar as Political and Social Allegory**

**Reading:** Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, 7-75

**Optional reading:** H.G. Wells reviews *Metropolis*

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to reading and film

## **Midterm due**

**Week 8: Neue Sachlichkeit. History, Urbanism, Materialism**

Modernisms and Cultural Politics: From Expressionism to Neue Sachlichkeit

**Reading:** Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', 75-86, 'Cult of Distraction', 323-328 (from *The Mass Ornament*); John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933*, 111-117

**Film:** Walter Ruttmann, *Berlin: Symphonie of a Great City* (1927)

**Forum:** Respond to the reading on canvas.

**Week 9: Sex, Gender, Sadism and Class**

**Reading:** Sabine Hake 'The Continuous Provocation of Louise Brooks'; S. Freud, 'A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men' (1910), 153-161.

**Film:** G. W. Pabst, *Pandora's Box* (1929)

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to readings and film

**Week 10: Queer Berlin: Gender, Authority, Erotic Liberation**

**Reading:** B. Ruby Rich, 'Mädchen in Uniform: From repressive tolerance to erotic liberation'; Nancy Thuleen, 'Mädchen in Uniform: Traditional and Innovative Strategies in an Early Women's Film'

**Supplement:** League For Human Rights: 'Appeal to All Homosexual Women'; Helene Stocker, 'Marriage as a Psychological Problem'; Kurt Hiller, 'The Law and Sexual Minorities'; Hugo Bettauer, 'The Erotic

Revolution'; Magnus Hirschfeld, 'Sexual Catastrophes'; Magnus Hirschfeld, 'The Development and Scope of Sexology'; Grete Ujhely, 'A Call for Sexual Tolerance'; Kurt Tucholsky, 'Rohm'

**Film:** Leontine Sagan, *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931)

**Film to watch at home before class:** *Anders als die Andern* (1919), Richard Oswald and Magnus Hirschfeld

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to readings and film

### **Week 11: Murder and collective fantasy: the politics of *M***

**Reading:** Anton Kaes 'M', 9-76; Gabriele Tergit, 'Fritz Lang's *M*: Filmed Sadism' p.632–633 (*Weimar Republic Sourcebook*)

**Film:** Fritz Lang, *M* (1931)

**In class screening:** Fritz Lang interview excerpts

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to reading

### **Week 12: Cynicism, Gangster Capitalism and Revolt**

**Reading:** Siegfried Kracauer, 'Threepenny Opera' in *From Caligari to Hitler*; Bertolt Brecht, *Epic Theater*

**Film:** G.W. Pabst, *Threepenny Opera*, (1931)

### **Week 13: Proletariat Film**

**Reading:** Bertolt Brecht, 'The Film Kuhle Wampe', 'Short Contribution on the Theme of Realism', in *Bertolt Brecht On Film and Radio* 206-209; Marc Silberman on *Kuhle Wampe*

**Film:** Slatan Theodor Dudow, *Kuhle Wampe*

### **Week 14 : From Criminality to State Terror, the Testament of Mabuse the dissolution of Weimar**

**Reading:** Ernst Bloch, "Hitler's Force" (April 1924), Hannah Arendt *Origins of Totalitarianism* (excerpt), Theodor Adorno, *Fascist Propaganda*

**Film:** Fritz Lang, *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933)

**Forum Assignment:** Respond to readings and film

### **Week 15: Fascinating Fascism: Kracauer's Nightmares Realized**

**Reading:** Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating Fascism'

**Film:** Leni Riefensthal, *Triumph of the Will* (1935)

## **Final Paper Due**

### **Course Requirements:**

**Readings and Reading Packet:** The readings are provided as a pdf or a physical reader to be purchased at the copy center. We may from time to time suggest texts not included on the syllabus or send handouts which you are welcome to include in your papers and in-class discussions.

In addition to the readings provided in the reader and listed on the schedule students are encouraged to research on their own. Below is a supplementary bibliography which is by no means exhaustive

**Classes will begin at 9:00AM and run until 11:50AM as scheduled.**

It is essential that you come prepared for these discussions as they will cover challenging material. Part of the preparation will occur in the online forums. Otherwise you should make sure you do all of the reading (at least once!), annotate your text or take notes, and identify key quotes throughout each text. Please have the relevant texts open during class time for reference.

**Attendance:** You must inform me if you are going to miss a class and it is your responsibility to make up any missed work. You are allowed two absences before it will affect your grade.

**Weekly Forum:** Every week you are required to participate in the online forum. You are to write a few paragraphs in response to the reading and the film. You are free to respond to anything as long as you are critically engaging directly with the text and the film (if applicable). In addition, you are expected to read one another's responses and if you like respond. This will prepare us for the synchronous part of class.

The point is to investigate the texts more intimately by responding in written form. One approach you might take is to choose a quote or two to initiate your response. You are not required to exhaustively explain what you read and watch, but rather to engage with one or two aspects of the text and film that strike you. You may write on a question and consider the various angles presented. You may consider a point that the text omits or identify a contradiction. You are also encouraged to consider the texts in light of previous in-class discussions or readings. This writing exercise is also meant to inform our in-class discussions and group work so make sure that you complete the assignments on time. You might write a mini film review reflecting on the relation between the readings and film. As the semester progresses you will learn to economize your writing and express highly complex ideas within the space of two or three paragraphs.

### **Midterm Assignment (5 pages [1500 words])**

#### **2 options.**

**1.** For your midterm project you are to write a five page paper (critical film review) on one or two films using at least two texts from our class. You should come up with a topic or theme to examine the film(s) and you should support your essay with the film(s), texts and other material from class. You are welcome to include outside research but it is not necessary.

**or**

**2.** You will choose a topic from a list suggested (or get approval from us). Options include Bauhaus Industrial Design, Architecture and Social Planning in Weimar, the New Woman, Marxist social and cultural criticism in the 1920s, Weimar literature and film, Fashion and Advertising, Poster design and Propaganda, Gender, Sexuality, Society and Politics, Technology, Art and Politics, Psychoanalysis and the Occult, Leisure and Sport in Weimar, the Cabaret, and others to be suggested.

#### **For both:**

Be sure to use quotes and be sure to clearly explain the argument that the text is making to either support your reading of the film(s) or to serve as a viewpoint that you are critiquing. If you are uncertain go back through the syllabus and your notes. Begin by rereading the texts and watching the films again. If you quote from the films or refer to a specific scene then use the time signature for reference. You must get approval before writing your paper. We will set aside times at the beginning or end of class to have an open discussion on papers, we are also available after class.

**Final Essay:** The final essay is meant to allow you to synthesize those aspects of the class that capture you. This project will take the form of a deeper investigation into one or more of the topics we covered through a close reading of two of the films. There may be three stages to this project. First you will come up with a thesis and outline. I will set aside time during one class period to have one on one discussions with everyone. For the second stage you will turn in a draft. I will respond with detailed feedback and you will turn in the final draft on **May 16**. You should begin thinking about your paper early in the semester and you may incorporate material from the class as we progress. The final essay should be 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages) and utilize at least two texts and one film from the second half of the semester.

**Class participation:** Participation is expected. This may take the form of asking questions, engaging in critical reflection, respectively engaging with other members of the class, attention. We also encourage you to start a screening/reading group with other students in the class.

**Attendance:** Please inform us if you are going to miss class and it is your responsibility to meet with me during office hours so that I can update you on the progress of the class.

### **Assessment and Grading:**

#### **Writing assignment assessment:**

#### **Grade calculation:**

- a. 10% Class participation
- b. 30% Forum
- c. 30% Midterm essay
- d. 30% Final Essay

#### **Forum Responses:**

Credit/No Credit

### **Bibliography and Recommended Books**

Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Cinema, Corporate Fictions, and the Invention of Cinema*, Chicago and London: ChicagoUP, 2008

Louise Brooks, *Lulu in Hollywood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

Mike Budd, ed., *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990)

Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt and Kristin McGuire, eds/ *Weimar Publics/Weimar Surfaces* (London: Berghahn, 2010)

Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema; Expressionism and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2008

Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, New York: Routledge, 2000

*Metropolis* (London: BFI, 2000)

Peter S. Fisher, *Fantasy and Politics: Visions of the Future in the Weimar Republic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991)

David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986)

Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider*, New York: W.W.Norton, 2001

Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*, (London: BFI, 2000)

Noah Isenberg, ed., *Weimar Cinema: an Essential Guide to the Classic Films of the Era*, New York: Columbia UP, 2008

Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 2011)

Franz Hessel, *Walking in Berlin A Flaneur in the Capital* (London: MIT Press, 2017)

John Hiden, *The Weimar Republic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York & London: Longman, 2006)

Noah Isenberg, ed. *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide in Classic Films of the Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993

*Berlin Alexanderplatz: Radio, Film, and the Death of Weimar Culture*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2006

Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffman (London: Penguin, 2004)

Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1995

Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Cinema and the Wounds of War*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2009

Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, eds., *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907-1933* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016)

Lawrence Kardish, ed. *Weimar Cinema, 1919-1933, Daydreams and Nightmares*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010

Harry Kessler, *Berlin in Lights*, ed. And trans. Charles Kessler, New York: Grove, 1999

Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995

Eberhard Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. P.S.Falla and R.J.Park, New York and London: Routledge, 1988

Klaus Kreimeier, *The UFA Story: a History of Germany's Greatest Film Company, 1918-1945*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1999

Walter Laqueur, *Weimar: a Cultural History*, New York: Putnam, 1974

Richard W. McCormack, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature and the 'New Objectivity'* (New York: Palgrave, 2001)

Heinrich Mann, *The Blue Angel: the Novel*; Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel: the Film* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979)

David Mellor, ed., *Germany: The New Photography 1927-33* (London: Arts Council of GB, 1978)

Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989

S.A. Praver, *The Blue Angel* (London: BFI, 2002)

*Caligari's Children: the Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)



Joseph Roth, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, trans. Michael Hoffmann, New York: W W Norton, 2004

Katharina von Ankum, ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press

Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2001

Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009