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ABSTRACT

A discussion of teaching culture through the use of films focuses on how German Cinema films can be used successfully as a required extracurricular activity in German second-language-instruction. This kind of extracurricular activity is seen as a two dimensional educational experience. From the students' point of view, everything about seeing a German film conspires against enjoyment: the language, the prospect of having to write a critique, and the strangeness of the plot and characters. The instructor's reaction to the students' reaction to the film forms the other half of the educational experience: the teacher must assume an "American" point of view to deal with the apparent culture shock. American students' reactions to German cinema reveal cultural differences, and the medium of film challenges their ability to analyze those differences. (Author/MSE)

German Film: Exploiting the Shock Value To Explain the Other Culture.

Annelise M. Duncan

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ABSTRACT

German Film: Exploiting the Shock Value to Explain the Other Culture.

The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media, declares Sigfried Cracauer (From Caligari to Hitler, 1947), and goes on to explain that films are never the product of an individual, and teamwork suppresses individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people. Moreover, they address themselves to the anonymous multitude, so that popular screen motifs can be supposed to satisfy existing mass desire. He asserts that even ~~even~~ the official Nazi war films, pure propaganda products, mirrored certain national characteristics which could not be fabricated.

While one may not agree completely with Cracauer's theories, there is ready evidence for the validity of his main assertion, of film reflecting deep layers of collective mentality, in the initial reaction of American students to German cinema. Using feature films as a required extra-curricular activity is a two-way educational experience. From the students' point of view, especially at the beginning level, everything about this activity conspires against enjoyment: the language, the prospect of having to write a critique but, above all, the strangeness of plot and characters, not to mention the absence of a happy, soul-satisfying ending. The instructor's reaction to that of the students to the film is the other half of this educational experience: s/he has to assume an "American" view point in order to deal with the apparent culture shock. And this is the true fascination of teaching culture through film.

Using Cracauer's interpretation of Caligari as its point of departure, this paper will seek to illustrate the "unseen dynamics of human relations characteristic of the inner life of the nation from which the films emerge" (S. Cracauer) with the example of several New German Cinema films.

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In our shrinking world with instantaneous global communication and a constant barrage of cross-cultural information, it would seem that all individual and national differences are destined to disappear. Architecture, fashion, foods, fads and social behavior transcend borders and leap oceans. A country's traditions are relegated to sentimental displays or commercial exploitation. However, such assimilation is largely superficial and a universal monoculture not imminent. The most powerful force in retaining a cultural identity is language in all its manifestations, past and present. Translation is only an approximation and must fall short of capturing entirely the mentality in which it is grounded.

There are various means of convincing students that language is the master key to other worlds, and one of them is film. Given the same advanced technology and technicians, the product--even language aside--will give away its origin. 'The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media,' declares Siegfried Kracauer, "From Caligari to Hitler." He criticizes the literature which deals with German films as if they were autonomous structures. According to Kracauer, they have collective character, the result of teamwork, and reflect psychological dispositions which appeal to an anonymous multitude. He adds that this does not imply a concept of a fixed national character. Rather, he is concerned with the psychological pattern of a people at a particular time. 'the films of the post-war period from 1920 to 1924 are a unique monologue interieur. They reveal developments in almost inaccessible layers of the German mind.' "Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari" (1920), co-authored by Hans Jannowitz and Carl Mayer is uniquely suited to verify this assertion. Jannowitz had witnessed in part and reconstructed the rest of the incident on which the script was based. He was a convinced pacifist with a deep hatred for the authority which had sent millions to war. Erich Pommer of Decla-Bioscop accepted the unusual script, at first to be directed by Fritz Lang. But when it was ultimately assigned to Dr. Robert Wiene he changed the story completely, over the violent protest of the authors. The original story exposes the madness inherent in society while Wiene's version glorifies authority and convicts its antagonist of madness. This film, states Kracauer, reflects the double aspect of post-war German life by coupling a reality in which Caligari's authority triumphs with a

hallucination in which the same authority is overthrown. This silent film in the expressionist style premiered in New York in April 1921, and in France the term "Caligarism" was coined and applied to a post-war world seemingly upside down. Having achieved world fame it became the most widely discussed film of the time. Four years later, the team of Carl Mayer, F. W. Murnau and cameraman Karl Freund release the crowning achievement of German silent cinema, "Der letzte Mann," starring the incomparable Emil Jannings. While it still contains expressionist elements, it is also the beginning of realistic cinema. Unlike "Caligari," it had great influence on German and American film, primarily because of its innovative use of the camera which is in almost continuous motion and frequently changes from the third person to the subjective first person perspective. The film revolves around the main character, a splendidly uniformed doorman of a luxury hotel and the ever recurring symbols of his dual existence: the revolving door, revealing alternately a lavish interior and an inhospitable city street, elevators in constant up and down motion, a drab, decaying tenement house and the glamorous hotel. But the focus of the film and the symbol par excellence is the uniform. It is because of it that family and neighbors in the shabby tenement regard the doorman with awe and admiration. The reflected glory of its authority brightens their impoverished existence. When, because of age, the doorman is demoted to men's room attendant and stripped of his uniform, he disintegrates before our eyes and becomes an aged, stooped and bewildered wreck. Is this the real person, was the uniform the man? Devastated by the prospect of facing family and neighbors, he even tries to steal back his pride and joy. A long shot with a high camera angle glimpses a pitiful figure in an inglorious apron, huddled on a stool in the basement lavatory, a sad but fitting and natural ending. However, at this point the film's only caption appears on the screen, and for the last few minutes, the former porter is seen rolling in money and good fortune, unexpectedly inherited from an American millionaire. It is this farcical conclusion, an American style happy ending, that gave the film its English title, "The Last Laugh". The German obsession with uniform as a symbol of authority and order is not restricted to the era under discussion, but it had never starred so exclusively and convincingly in a film before. The incongruous happy conclusion which appeals to an American audience but baffles a German one points up another basic trait: German traditional ideology discredits the notion of luck in favor of that of fate.

In defense of introducing German cinema with two silent films when we deem language all-important, Kracauer may be quoted again. 'While verbal statements more often than not express intentions, camera shots are likely to penetrate the unintentional. This is what mature silent film has done. They came upon levels below the dimension of consciousness, and since the spoken word had not yet assumed control, unconventional or even subversive images were allowed to slip in. With the addition of dialogue intentional meaning prevailed.'

The German fascination with the uniform as it embodies structure and hierarchy is akin to the respect for title and position on the intellectual level. Without this concept, the rise and fall of Professor Rath, the tragic hero of "Der blaue Engel" cannot be fully appreciated. This early sound film, produced in 1930 by Josef von Sternberg and based on Heinrich Mann's novel, "Professor Unrath," portrays German bourgeois society with its weaknesses and vices. But the paranoid tyrant who marries Rosa Fröhlich and makes her the instrument of his revenge on society is sufficiently humanized in the film to evoke pity in the end. Nevertheless, from his unassailable position of power, the professor rules the classroom with an iron hand, brooks no insubordination and assumes the role of moral guardian outside of school as well. It is in the diligent pursuit of this role that fate overtakes him. When he catches up with his spellbound adolescent charges, he meets Lola Lola and also succumbs to her charms. Casting responsibility and prestige to the winds, he plunges into the destructive relationship, denouncing the bourgeois values he had proclaimed so zealously. Rapture is soon followed by disillusionment and, as he becomes Lola's hapless and despised slave, by a complete disintegration of personality. The film is powerful because of Sternberg's belief that art has little to do with story but rather with exposing reality beneath the surface by implication. The principal's state of mind is revealed by focusing on the reaction of outside observers and through the use of recurring symbols, albeit of sledgehammer subtlety. Humiliated past endurance at last when he is made to play the cock-crowing fool before the home town citizenry, the degraded professor flees in panic. In his old classroom he collapses and dies, clutching the lectern, once the symbol of his authority and prestige.

Considering the main theme of rigid structure versus disintegration in three otherwise disparate films, one is once again inclined to agree with Kracauer who suggests that 'a persistent reiteration of motifs marks them as

outward projections of inner urges.' Given the German collective mentality of the time the message appears to be that the only alternative to absolute control is total chaos.

With the demise of the Weimar Republic in 1933, Germany's first experiment with a democratic form of goverment ends abruptly. Within a few weeks, the cinema becomes the most tightly controlled instrument of the new regime. Propaganda minister Goebbels purges the industry of all so-called foreign elements, and many of the exiled take their talents to the United States. Party members replace the ousted, all filmscripts must be submitted for approval, all finished products previewed by Goebbels before their release. Propaganda films are elaborate, costly, state-of-the-art productions, but even entertainment fare is forced into the narrow confines of a world view imposed upon the regimented people under Nazi rule. Considering such restrictive and goal- oriented practices, one tends to disagree with Kracauer who maintains that 'even the official Nazi war films, pure propaganda products as they were, mirrored certain national characteristics which could not be fabricated.' Spontaneous creativity and experimentation are stifled and surviving films of that era are primarily of some historic value. That "Triumpf des Willens" remains unforgotten has several reasons, foremost among them the gifted filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl and the never ending controversy surrounding her. The time is 1934, the place the historic city of Nürnberg, and the occasion a massive party rally, a muscle-flexing extravaganza of the year-old regime. With 30 cameras and a staff of 120, Riefenstahl applies her skill and experience to the inherently boring subject of endless columns of uniforms on the move for endless hours Why the result is a remarkable picture is largely explained by the filmmaker in her book when she notes, 'the preparations for the party convention were made in concert with the preparations for the camera work.' Clearly then, the planning of a spectacular propaganda film was an integral part of setting up the 1934 rally. Kracauer calls this picture--named, planned and commissioned by Hitler himself--a complete transformation of reality, like Potemkin's villages. Sophisticated camera work utilizes the striking old architecture of the city, cloud formations by day, bonfires and torchlight by night for an ever changing backdrop as it approaches the moving formations from all angles, zooms forward for close-ups of faces of the marchers, of spectators in the windows, and upward to a forest of waving flags above a sea of people. the true achievement of this perfectly manipulated film lies not in recreating reality

but in conjuring up an illusion of spontaneity. Like Riefenstahl's "Olympia," to this day the most accomplished record of such an event, "Triumpf des Willens" has survived more than 50 years of technical advancement and still chills modern audiences with its power of mass seduction.

Eleven years and a global war later, the country and the German movie industry lie in ruins although UFA, the Universal Film Company, the former giant refuses to die until 1961. Only two significant pictures are produced, one by Wolfgang Staudte, "Die Mörder sind unter uns" (1946), for the Soviet zone, using the ruined landscape of Berlin, the other by Helmut Käutner, "In jenen Tagen" (1947), for the West. When the division is finalized in 1949, the two German cinemas go their separate ways. The West German film of the 1950s primarily reflects the unreflecting optimism of the "Wirtschaftswunder", and shallow entertainment prevails. Even the few films that attempt a reckoning only show the effects of Nazism without examining the causes. The 1960s, at last, produce a generation of young filmmakers who found the New German Cinema and recast the role of the medium. In the 1960s and 1970s, German films regain international recognition, and directors like Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders are making their mark. The era of Kracauer's analysis is past, and a generation who never experienced it is forming its own images. Kluge, the intellectual among the new directors, has a Brechtian approach: films should analyse, challenge conventional forms of perception and expression and provoke questions. His realism is critical, seeking truth beneath deceptive surfaces. His film, "Abschied von Gestern" (1966), provides the breakthrough of the New German Cinema, achieving international recognition and awards. Schlöndorff who makes most of his pictures in partnership with his wife, Margarethe von Trotta, studied at the Paris film school. A radical undercurrent runs through all of his work, but only on a thematic level. His great skill lies in the deliberate reduction of a complex literary text like Robert Musil's "Törless" or Günther Grass' "Blechtrommel" to a straightforward narrative, and his favorite theme is that of rebellion. Fassbinder is almost synonymous with the New German Cinema and has reached a wider audience at home and abroad than the other directors. The mood and manners of melodrama are probably the strongest common denominator in his films which, thematically, are as indebted to his own biography as to the influence of Holliwood. His concerns are personal relationships, domination and dependence, emotional blackmail and exploitation. His 1978 film, "Die Ehe der Maria Braun," a social history of

the first decade in post-war Germany, attracted some of the biggest audiences of any recent German film. When Fassbinder died in his thirties, he had made over 40 feature films. Wenders says of his work, "All my films have as an undercurrent the Americanization of Germany." He is the only major new director with formal training in filmmaking. His favorite theme is loneliness, and his 1976 picture, "Kings of the Road" is one of the great cult movies of the New German Cinema. Descriptions of Herzog resort to many adjectives like bizarre, obsessive, dream-like, fantastic and fanatic. He produces all of his films himself, often in remote, exotic places under dangerous conditions, and the stories of shooting the films are as amazing as the movies themselves. He has a talent for finding extraordinary people to play in his pictures and uses few professional actors. His landscapes tend to dwarf people, he has a penchant for the odd and bizarre, for the outsider and for images of circularity. Humor is injected even into the most desparate situations, often to reveal the discrepancy between fancyful expectations and vulgar reality. Herzog's 1978 remake of the F.W.Murnau classic, "Nosferatu" is true to the original, plus color and sound. But there is, of course, a Herzog touch: for the closing scene he surreptitiously released 11,000 rats on his Delft, Holland location. They were white--he painted them gray.

Despite the broad spectrum of personalities and concepts, there seems to be much common ground, shared, no doubt, to a large extent with their German contemporaries, the recent post-war generations. It is the reassertion of the individual, the rejection of the sanctity of tradition, the perceived lack of an acceptable goal, a profound distrust of all leadership and its ability to solve problems, and finally at best and against their better judgement, a very cautious optimism. Showing films of the 60s, 70s and 80s that tell the story of post-war German consciousness and behavior confirms my suspicion that it is no more accessible to American students than that of the Caligari to Hitler era. Two well-known New German Cinema productions, "Ali: Angst essen Seele auf", by Fassbinder, and "Strosszek" by Herzog, are presented as cases in point.

The story of "Ali" (1974) is first mentioned in his movie, "The American Soldier" (1970) and was originally inspired by Douglas Sirk's, "All That Heaven Allows" (1955). Emmi Kurowski, a widow around sixty who supplements her pension by working as a cleaning woman, meets Ali, a young black Moroccan guestworker, in a pub frequented by emigrant laborers. Their loneliness and

need for human warmth and companionship is more compelling tha the obvious obstacles of age, color and culture. The relationship leads to marriage, and both find themselves isolated, ostracized and scorned, not only by Emmi's family, neighbors and co-workers but by Ali's associates as well. When external pressures eventually diminish, the couple must face problems in their own relationship which are unresolved as the movie ends. "Ali" has been called Fassbinders most optimistic film but there is little indication on the part of the characters and the circumstances to bear this out, and the words of the author would seem to confirm it, 'there is no love, he says, only the possibility of love. Love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression.' The characters are not only trapped in the antagonism between their own emotions and society's taboos, their personal freedom and social restrictions, they are locked within their own separate, disparate worlds as well. Emmi actually shares the prejudice of her circle against "Gastarbeiter". Her love for Ali is out of context and irreconcilable with the rest of her life, a timid rebellion against reality. Emmi is Ali's lifeline in an alien world but she fails to make that world less alien. He is bewildered and resentful of his perceived role in society, his inner turmoil manifesting itself in bleeding ulcers. Fassbinder reenforces the plight of his characters visually: time and again they are trapped in tight framing shots through banisters and within the lines of windows and doors. Young American viewers tend to rebel against such confinement and complexity. Individuals should be free to choose and have their choices respected, overturning society's edicts, and the characters are too complex making happy endings almost impossible to achieve.

That the exercise of free choice does not necessarily guarantee happiness seems to be one of the conclusions of Herzog's 1977 film, "Strosszek." Bruno S., an amateur Herzog had initially found for the lead in "Kaspar Hauser" also plays the main character in this picture. The film opens with a succession of scenes in Berlin, portraying Bruno and his girlfriend, Eva, in a dismal situation. Eva, through every fault of her own, is the repeated victim of abuse by three pimps who just as regularly beat up Bruno whenever he attempts to protect Eva. Completely defeated, Bruno turns to a friend, a gentle old man who remembers that he has some relatives in America. Soon the three of them are poring over a map of the land of endless opportunity, marveling at its immensity and finding Wisconsin, their destination. Ironically, the shock

of facing their new homeland is even greater for the American viewer than for the three immigrants. Instead of a woodlands paradise dotted with enchanting blue lakes, there is a barren countryside, razed for development not yet apparent, and the trailer homes, randomly scattered over the dusty waste, seem to testify to a haphazard, makeshift life style. Bruno finds work in a garage, Eva in a truck stop restaurant, and all the trappings of civilization are soon installed in their trailer, on credit far beyond any realistic hopes of repayment. The dream crumbles when the nice young banker, smiling apologetically , visits for the last time and puts up trailer and contents for auction. Bruno and the old man are homeless, Eva runs off with a trucker. The point, of course, is not a disillusioning America, a cold wasteland, but rather a misguided dream: Bruno can leave his country but he cannot leave Bruno behind. His inability to create a life for himself in Berlin prevents him from making one in Wisconsin. Eva, always relapsing into prostitution, despite good intentions, and the old man living in his own dream world compound the dilemma, yet fit logically into the life of Bruno, programmed for failure. Bruno and the old man hold up a barber shop to buy groceries across the street. The old man is apprehended while Bruno, clutching his gun and a turkey, makes his escape in an ancient truck. Without cutting off the engine, he gets out at a tourist exhibition Indian reservation where dancing chickens go endlessly round and round in a cage. Outside again, he climbs into a chair lift with his last possessions. The chaotic climax is an orgy of Herzog's symbols as the camera focuses in turn on dancing chickens, Bruno going round and round on the chairlift, and the circling truck now surrounded by police cars flashing their lights. At last, with the camera on the truck, a shot is heard. The escape to the American dream could not succeed because there is no freedom for those like Bruno, caught forever in their own circular motion.

While German filmmakers use a great variety of topics, there are many similarities in the choice and treatment of the problems their characters experience. Changing times have not significantly altered basic perceptions of life, as Germany continues to bear the burdens of her past. A certain fatalism and a seemingly groundless pessimism still run deep, and humor, when it appears, is often more puzzling than amusing to American viewers. The reaction of students to German cinema reveals much about cultural differences and this not so subtle and very available medium challenges their ability to analyse them.