

Time, Space and Causality: Joe May, Fritz Lang and the Modernism of German Detective Film¹

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Such are the scars the First World War left on the face of modernity in cultural memory that film historians assume the end of the war to have been as radical a break in the development of the cinema as it was in political history and the arts. Not only would it be counter-intuitive to argue otherwise, but it would also cast doubt on the cinema as a legitimate art form—precisely what the films of the post-war period, under the name of ‘Expressionist cinema’, have stood for: the clean break with the old order, the aesthetic rebellion of a new generation. In matters cinema, however, the generational rupture argument, no less than the ‘art-versus-commerce’ argument (foundational for any avant-garde) may ultimately prove unhelpful even in understanding the aesthetic features of a particular style, not to mention the continuities, coalitions and cross-fertilisations typical of a highly professional elite of craftsmen and technicians, such as every filmmaking practice represents, whether it is industrially-controlled like Hollywood, or organised more like a cluster of craft guilds like the German cinema from the 1910s to roughly 1928. However, because of a periodisation scheme transferred from political history (the foundation of the Weimar Republic, 1918), an over-emphasis on a single film-historical factor (the foundation of Ufa, 1917), and a single film (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, 1920), the German cinema up to 1918 is generally treated as distant and distinct from the post-war *Aufbruch* (new start) undertaken by a cinematic avant-garde presumed to have been in open rebellion against the commercial film production of the time. This template of cultural history in turn vitiates the debate about modernism and the cinema, by positing a series of oppositions that have proven to be largely untenable.

In what follows I want to argue for a more nuanced assessment, leading to a revision of assumptions (but also a potentially more internally contradictory picture) regarding both the rupture between

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pre- and post-war cinema, and the gap between art-cinema and commercial productions. What is at issue is how one defines cinematic modernity, how to differentiate it from modernisation, and what significance one places on notions of convention, genre and technique in the evaluation of style and meaning in the cinema. I shall restrict myself to examining a few apparently formal parameters—notably the treatment of filmic space (contiguous, separate or overlapping action spaces), the generation of suspense (the uneven distribution of knowledge), and narrative point of view (narrational perspectivism). I shall not go over the evidence that suggests how the technical and industrial infrastructure of filmmaking in Germany before 1918 exhibits entirely consistent traits—albeit complexly mediated by both international competition and the war situation—with the film industry that was built up after the war, under the conglomerate known as ‘Ufa’.² Rather, I want to consider certain internal stylistic features which suggest that the logic of filmic space, the handling of plot-points and narrative perspective display similar continuities. If it can be shown that films from the period 1914–1917 produced some of the major stylistic changes, then the argument that they actively prepared the ground for the films of the 1920s becomes more persuasive. Similarly, if German cinema’s most intensive period of transformation and innovative drive are indeed the years from 1913 to 1923, then it becomes imperative to compare the films with what was being produced internationally, and especially by the popular genre cinema of France and the United States. Finally, if a film from 1920—the year of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*—can be shown to display an alternative ‘modernist’ aesthetic, while generically belonging to the ‘commercial’ side of the divide, then our ideas of modernity and modernisation in the cinema will also be enriched.

To take as an example the so-called *Autorenfilme* (‘auteur’ films) of 1913 and 1914, whose innovations in film language (lighting, staging) as well as associations with motifs and genres derived from literature and painting (the Gothic mystery stories and fairy-tales, Romantic ghost stories and the occult) are well-recognised. They are usually deemed to have inspired the post-1918 films of Robert Wiene, G.W. Pabst, F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. But this high-art genealogy has eclipsed the equally close connections of the latter to the popular cinema made by genre directors like Franz Hofer, Max Mack, Mime Misu and Joe May, not to mention other, non-German influences, such as Danish directors or D. W. Griffith. The gaps in our knowledge about distribution, the loss of so many of the films from the period, and the neglect of those that had survived—deemed until recently too

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‘commercial’ to be of scholarly interest—have all contributed to the consolidation of the idea that a radical break occurred with a film like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. ‘Early Cinema’ studies have begun to redress the balance, making the surviving films from 1911 onwards reveal some of the less obvious logics that underpin their methods of framing and modes of narration; in the process, they demonstrate the sophistication that the supposedly primitive and backward German cinema of the 1910s was capable of, once it is recognised on its own terms rather than judged by later criteria.³

More so than any other body of work, it is the films of Fritz Lang that prove just how intensive was the reflexive assimilation of pre-1918 (German and international) cinema, and also how indebted the classic German avant-garde film of the 1920s was to its often-despised cousins from the genre-and-star cinema of the period. The example of one of his first post-war films (thought to have been lost) will serve to illustrate how filmic forms of the preceding decade developed seamlessly (albeit by being given new meanings) into the styles of *mise-en-scène* of the 1920s. Important to this discussion will be the role of D.W. Griffith: perhaps not in the sense that the German classic directors such as Lang and Murnau were directly copying from Griffith’s films (it is unclear which Griffith films were shown in Germany and when), but rather, because of the similar challenges that Griffith in the 1910s and German directors during the 1920s posed themselves in their approach to issues of filmic narration, in their use of space and their story-telling contact with the audience.

By proposing such a realignment of periods (‘primitive’ versus ‘classical’), national styles (American versus European) and individual signatures (Lang versus Eisenstein), in the spirit of New Film History, I do not intend to level important differences nor to iron them out altogether; as we shall see, there are significant divergences between the films of, for instance, Joe May and Fritz Lang. But these ought to be understood within the parameters of a shared frame of reference, and not be based solely on personality differences; likewise, variations in talent, even though they undoubtedly existed, should not be used as primary criteria. In the pressing task to reassess the popular European (in my case, German) cinema of the 1910s—a period where our lack of knowledge has for too long been directly proportional to dismissive accounts of this cinema in traditional histories and surveys—humility and ignorance oblige us to view each surviving film with fresh eyes, and not merely to ensure their preservation as archival sources. Treated as archaeological remains, they may lead us to think differently about several ‘transitional’ moments in film history, and thus yield a better

understanding of what was 'modern' and what 'modernist' in the cinema leading up to Expressionism, Russian montage cinema, Dada and Surrealism.

Griffith and Early Cinema as Anti-cinema

Griffith was and remains the Janus figure of film history. Even if the films he made in the 1910s did not reach Europe until after the war, his work retained the capacity to be inherited by such apparently opposed 'movements' as the German 'Expressionist' film, the Russian school of montage and the French avant-garde. In each particular case, appropriation took place under widely divergent ideological and national circumstances.

For instance, one of the reasons why German and Russian cinema was able to learn from the stylistic model of Griffith's multi-strand narratives, and even refine on their complex weave, was that both film industries were, for a time, sheltered from the full impact of competition in the world market, albeit for different reasons. Classic Hollywood style, which developed its distinctive and enduring narrative economy and heavily plot-focused tempo around 1917–1918, cannot be explained without reference to the 'real' economy of industrial efficiency – the screenplay as the blueprint for production, the division of work reaching into all areas of production, and including the management system of the studios. But in Germany there was an unresolved tension between the narrative forms the directors championed – or, in their fight for artistic legitimacy and respectability, felt themselves compelled to champion – and the practical possibilities of realising those forms as economically as possible. In other words, a style developed that became in certain respects too complex and too expensive to serve as the basis for a modern film industry (with the result that Ufa went bankrupt in 1926–27). In the 1910s, the American film industry was already fully focused on the market. Hence, out of economic considerations and a drive to make their products intelligible and attractive to an international audience, the system targeted optimal efficiency in both story-structure and narration, while minimizing 'local' or 'ethnically specific' content. By contrast, the German model made possible the quasi-experimental style generally known as Expressionism because, at least at the top echelon of Ufa, production was still orientated around the director *qua* 'artist' and less geared towards public taste than was its American counterpart. A similar case can be argued for Eisenstein, Kuleschov and Pudovkin in the Soviet Union, although there, directors

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needed to legitimate themselves to their political paymasters as much as they wanted to be recognised as 'artists'. The ideological pressure to establish oneself in one's home market as an artist (or as a revolutionary) prompted both German and Russian filmmakers to borrow from Griffith's model, who also fought constantly for his status as an 'artist', painfully aware as he was of how star status was shifting in the 1920s from the director to the actors. In Germany, however, the push for special effects and other technological innovations, in highly prestigious super-productions like *Die Nibelungen*, *Faust*, *Der letzte Mann* or *Metropolis*, formed part of a different strategy: to conquer the European and overseas markets, with the American market itself as the ultimate goal, irrespective of (initial) cost. A study of German cinema's twofold strategy reveals the potential pitfalls for a consumer-orientated industry: whereas the American industry was directly organised around demand and the economic-formal means of satisfying it, the German situation was to an extent 'distorted' by the critical establishment as the elite arbiter of public taste and of the need for boosting national prestige. It required that cinema be art, a demand which the film industry took on board as part of its effort to construct an international market for 'quality' products from the pariah nation that was Germany after 1918.⁴ At the same time, the industrial base of the German film industry could not come to terms with this avant-garde ideology, where production schedules were vague, budgets liable to be exceeded and the deadlines for premieres not met.⁵ The 'modernism' of the artist was in conflict with the 'modernising pressures' experienced by the system.

Against this backdrop, the differences between American and European praxis, as elaborated in traditional histories of film, are real, but they also have been exaggerated, mostly because analysed not in a historical, but predominantly ideological context. The manipulation of space and spatial coherence (German Expressionism), the use of continuity (the French long takes), of discontinuity (the American 'invisible' cut) and of non-continuity (the Russian principle of montage: hard cuts and juxtaposition), point-of-view structures, the exchange of gazes and the use of off-screen space: all, it is now agreed, make up a nexus of variables that define a given style whilst simultaneously setting benchmarks that can identify national variations and periodise film history accordingly. Furthermore, the use (or not) of intertitles, external or internal commentaries, and other forms of semiotic or discursive elaboration of the image flow determine narrative modes and filmic form. They, too, cannot be viewed independently from either the industrial

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conditions of film production or the social conditions of film consumption.⁶

Griffith's concept of multiple action spaces that gradually coalesce into one single space was employed by the directors of the 1920s for a number of purposes: in order to achieve a more complex articulation of causal relations; to develop narrative forms that could bring about a crisis in the relationship between vision and knowledge; or to produce completely alternative imaginative spaces like those of the classic German silent film, with its preference for fantastic, Gothic or horror motifs. The uncanny in Murnau, Lang's use of the *mise-en-abyme* construction, specific lighting techniques, the use of off-screen space as compared to space outside the individual field of vision, and the frequency of frontal views of characters looking, not followed by reverse-shots of what they are looking at, are well-known examples of a 'Germanic style' which, however, has American roots. Yet the European dimension of the new articulation of time and space, following on from Griffith, has been less commented upon. For instance, the adoption of the continuity style through French impressionistic cinema, which depends heavily on the point-of-view shot and on camera movement, but which, diegetically, is shaped more by the subjectivity of the protagonist than by spatiotemporal causality. Likewise, Eisenstein re-invented Griffith's technique of non-continuity with reference to an opaque, multifaceted causality; Abel Gance combined non-continuity with the point-of-view take; and Renoir employed off-screen space in *Nana*. Finally, whilst he parodied impressionistic subjectivity, Buñuel 'deconstructed' the classic continuity montage in *Un chien andalou* (1929), which is strongly dependent on the structures shot/reverse-shot and shot/object, but which nonetheless defies spatial continuity and contiguity. All of these cases might be analysed in terms of the formal problems and options first explored by Griffith and leading to his unique way of creating suspended causal chains out of spatial discontinuity. In one sense, German Expressionist, Soviet montage and French Surrealist cinema once again re-invented certain aspects of the cinema of attraction, with its non-continuity and spatial coherence over temporal succession. They did so, however, with the conscious intention of violating the norms by now in place, and to pit those earlier styles against the narrative rules of the classic American film (which was dominated by the optical point of view).

Only after including this complex dynamic of moves and counter-moves, of norms and their disruption, is it possible to engage meaningfully with questions of national identity or, I would argue, the aesthetic value of these films. Formal parameters, not taste and

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ideology, should decide on the eternal opposition between Europe and America, art and commerce, popular modernity and avant-garde modernism in a historically differentiated way. Although the claims made here are rather programmatic, the hope is that eventually the New Film History will be able to do justice to this ambition not only with respect to the German cinema, where the perceived quality gap between studio-made genre films and the avant-garde is said to be particularly wide, but also in other areas of film history of the 1910s and 1920s, notably Danish films, French films and Russian films before the 1917 Revolution and prior to the work of Eisenstein.

Perceptual Form and Spatial Apparatus of the Popular Film of the 1910s

In order to re-classify the films of the 1910s and to periodise more accurately the 'transitional period' between what Noel Burch called 'primitive' and 'institutional' cinema, it has become customary to use the term 'cinema of attraction' to refer to the earlier mode in contrast to the 'cinema of narrative integration', replacing Burch's own conceptual pair of 'exteriority' and 'internalisation'. Both suggestions are useful, if one wants to concentrate, as I do, on the question of filmic space and the position of the observer. The most important point to bear in mind is perhaps that viewers of early cinema were used to a filmic space that does not appear to modern audiences as either coherent or realistic. Its frontality reminds us of the theatre, but this is misleading: early cinema assigns the spectator a spatial position, which can be performative and participatory, voyeuristically isolated and gregariously collective, without it disrupting the spectacle or the narrative. In this respect, early cinema is more naturally 'epic' in Bertolt Brecht's sense; but it is also 'Aristotelian', perhaps without knowing it: 'illusionist' and 'anti-illusionist' by nature, it does not recognise the distinction in the first place. Examples of such reflexively performative spaces can be found in the films Urban Gad made with Asta Nielsen, or in the works of Max Mack and Franz Hofer, Paul von Woringen, Joseph Delmont and William Wauer; together, these filmmakers illustrate, and bring into play, the many kinds of relationship between audience-space and screen-space possible at that time.⁷ The dynamic alignment of physically present audience and the imaginary presence of people on the screen provides the Archimedean point around which the film forms of the 1910s in Germany turn. It sets us the task of uncovering the logic behind the

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rapid and often confusing developments in the duration of films, their marketing strategies and performance practices, but it also requires fresh questions about the cinema's position relative to the other arts. The supposed theatricality of early film, or conversely, its attempts to distance itself from the theatre, are bywords for the polemical and antagonistic feel of previous discussions. Yet equally intense debates were conducted about the cinema's relation to sculpture and three-dimensionality, or its affinity with music and the world of sound ('silent cinema' was rarely, if ever, silent). The screen-observer relationship would, therefore, be one (albeit crucial) component in the uneven and inconsistent evolution that, in the sphere of modern urban existence, re-constructed the masses as observers, and in so doing both fragmented them as subjects and, at the same time, collectivised them into communities.

The films of early cinema figured their public as physically present, whereas later narrative long-play films were typified by an imaginary point of observation, depicted as having a virtual presence. This fact indicates that it is not theatre and film that oppose one another; rather it is one mode of cinema that gradually separates itself from another. This has consequences for film interpretation, restating the difference in terms of the interface between, on one side, reception and genre, and, on the other, the formal characteristics of individual films. To give an example: an approach focused on reception and genre would no doubt want to draw social conclusions from the multiplicity of nannies and sons of officers, or from the middle-aged lovers soliciting girls young enough to be their daughters. Films such as *Vergebens*, *Heimgefunden*, *Die Erzieherin*, *Die Czernowska*, *Perlen bedeuten Tränen* would reveal the class, caste and status system of Wilhelmine society to be almost sociopathic. However, certainties concerning psychoanalytic or ideological interpretations of the numerous father-figures, among whom are both military and clerical men, dwindle in view of the complexity of the interplay between observer-space and screen-space in some of these films, which on the thematic level strike such conservative or even reactionary poses. A concrete example can serve to illustrate the point: *Die Kinder des Majors* is a German film from the Desmet collection at Amsterdam, where a set of typically social conflicts (revolving around status, class and gender) receive a specific filmic treatment in terms of filmic space and narrative that stands in subtle tension with the overt ideology. Aside from the year of its production (1914) and the production company (Eiko), very little is known about this film—neither the director nor the performers are credited. In *Die Kinder des Majors*, much like Messter's

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Des Pfarrers Töchterlein, one finds stock types of Wilhelmine society from the military, the aristocracy, the Colonial Society (*Kolonialverein*), and from the duelling corps of university students. It is, then, a short step to infer that this cinema was Prussian and patriarchal in character. Here is a plot summary:

Two officers, the dashing lieutenant Stephano and the diffident Count von Amro, are trying to woo Marie, the daughter of a retired major and the sister of a cadet, Alexander. Marie becomes Amro's fiancée, but before they can marry, he must spend another five years in the colonies in order to be promoted more quickly, and hence to acquire financial independence. Jealous, Stephano compromises Marie in the presence of her brother; her father, the Major then challenges him to a duel. But at the last minute the duel is called off because Stephano, whose creditors are hard on his heels, is arrested. When not only the old major returns home safe and sound, but also Amro arrives from the colonies on leave, their joy knows no bounds.⁸

There is little in this précis to suggest that the film is about more than 'convention, customs and morality [...] and the inflexibility of the military code of honour'.⁹ Yet for the historian of early cinema, a second drama plays out alongside the triumph of good over evil: namely, the battle between 'primitive' or 'exterior' representation and the 'internalised', 'classical' narrative mode, which succeeded it.

While in many other films of the period, both modes—that of the collectively present audience and that of the individualised, imaginary observer—are simultaneously present and often combined for special dramaturgical effect, the case of *Die Kinder des Majors* is remarkable for the near total victory of classical cinema, meaning that the motivation of events and the observer's position relative to the action are almost entirely transferred from an external (physical, real) space to an internal (psychological, mental) zone. The film constructs within its narrative such subtle variations in the degrees and gradients of knowledge (who knows what, when, and from whom) as well as between characters and audience, that one can legitimately speak of the spectators being 'trained' by the film into a new mode of apprehending plot and motivation. The play of hiding and revealing information, the alternation of ignorance, partial knowledge, surmise and surprise is designed to force the audience to transport themselves *into* the characters and not to conceive of them, as before, as mere emotional stand-ins or plot automata. What makes the film so exciting and so modern is the means whereby it gives the observer access to the inner world especially of the female protagonist: her emotions,

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her mindset and her feelings of shame are gradually built up and carefully modulated. If Marie simply does not know whom she loves, the drama beneath the drama, as it were, is that she alone knows the reasons for the compromised situation into which she unwittingly has put first her brother and then her father. Blameless, she will be blamed—as woman and as object of the male gaze, and we know that she knows it. All of this is conveyed without the need for the film to give us any information beyond its staging of looks, its cuts, its spatial construction (inner/outer, stairs, front door) and the awareness about her entrapment that these spaces bring to the central character. A *deus ex machina* has to save the day, but her dilemma of the onlooker as ‘helpless agent’ (mirroring the position of the spectator) lingers on beyond the happy ending.

The purpose of my reading of the film is to suggest a meaning almost opposite to what is normally understood by social convention and rigidity of manners. Crucial here is the cinematic situation itself, mediated through *mise-en-scène* and narrative forms. At one level, we have the representative function of social types: military men, clergy, members of the aristocracy, fathers and sons, fathers and daughters. The film assumes we are familiar with the cultural values and social status of these figures in relation to each other. Thus ‘satisfaction’ (in the form of a duel) for perceived slurs on the family honour is available only within a socially codified value system. This is why the major, as father, has to step forward, even though he is visibly less likely to survive a duel than his son. Yet the complicated narrative structure—who knows what about whom and when?—means that our affective involvement is focused on the quandary of a woman being denied agency, not on challenging the rigid codes of class and military caste. Because Maria’s superior knowledge (of the causes) and inferior agency (her ability to do something about it) is rendered tangible for the observer, it is the manipulation of knowledge that produces the (melo)dramatic pathos, heightening the subsequent relief when the surprising turn of events finally suspends, but does not resolve, the conflict. The fact that the police who arrest the jealous Stephano at the site of the duel are a *deus-ex-machina* is underscored by the way the showdown is extended to the point that there is no doubt that the Major would have been killed by Stephano. As in the Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s, the happy outcome thus triumphs whilst ‘preserving’ the potentiality of an unhappy ending.

This insight into the different regimes of knowledge, and the degree to which they establish new kinds of interiority and subjectification can, I believe, be generalised, to provide the basis

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for a more differentiated classification of early film genres and their stylistics. Apart from setting, character and social milieu (the semantics), and going beyond the nature of the narrative intrigue (the syntactics), genres might usefully be defined according to how the uneven distribution of knowledge involves the spectator in reflexively experiencing the cinematic situation and her position as the observer 'in the dark' or 'in the know'. It highlights the strategic role of the detective film in early German cinema: even *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) is remarkable not just thanks to the angular décor and painted faces, but because a multi-stranded narrative, sustained by mutually interdependent sources of knowledge, is woven around a detective plot.¹⁰ Viewed from this perspective, the German detective film, as it developed from 1912 and 1913 to the early 1920s, can be understood as a particular 'schooling' not so much of the observing eye, as of the inferential mind. By inducting its audience into a new, typically filmic way of perceiving causal relations and the interpersonal dynamics of withholding rather than imparting information, the genre made a perhaps hitherto insufficiently appreciated contribution to modernity, in the way it deployed the medium itself to make visibility and perception properties of thought and deductive reasoning, rather than (merely) of visual evidence and ocular disclosure.

The Detective Film as School of the Outer and Inner Eye

A detective film from 1914, which thematises some of these aspects of 'seeing' in the service not solely of knowing but of embodied perception and its special temporalities, can illustrate this awareness of the paradoxes of vision in early cinema. *Der Mann im Keller* is one of the few surviving parts from the extremely popular Stuart Webbs series, starring Ernst Reicher and directed by Joe May, one of the truly underrated directors of world cinema before the advent of sound.¹¹ Although the fragmentary nature of the work makes it difficult to generalise, this, the second part of the series, concerns the mysterious disappearance of one person, and the supernumerary appearance of another—one body too many, as it were. Stuart Webbs is engaged in order to help bring back to life this body, which—prefiguring the vampire in *Nosferatu*—lies in a coffin-like box throughout much of the film. The story concerns a gang of international spies and patent thieves, whose leader so closely resembles the man in the cellar that even his fiancée falls prey to the disguise. In other words, motifs better known from 'Expressionist' cinema about *Doppelgänger*, 'undead' vampires and the 'return of the repressed' are here treated not as

elements of the Gothic or signs of the uncanny.¹² On the contrary, they give 'body' (substance) to a conspiracy thriller and a comedy of mistaken identities, a fact that also disconcerted contemporary critics, who puzzled over the question whether the hero took seriously what befell him or somehow was in on the game.¹³

However, what is innovative about *Der Mann im Keller* becomes clearer in comparison with a much better-known film from the 1910s, Max Mack's *Wo ist Coletti* (1913), which has long been recognised as a model for the humorous but suspenseful detective film.¹⁴ There, the appeal of the plot consists in an ingenious stringing together of chase sequences, popular since the beginnings of cinema, but usually lacking a credible narrative motivation. *Wo ist Coletti* imposes, right from the start, a clearly delimited time-frame and goal, both of which motivate the many changes of place and situation. At the same time, unlike the diegetic public trying to identify him beneath his many disguises, the spectator always knows who and where Coletti is. This generates the type of suspense that results from the uneven distribution of knowledge and that derives its humour from the credulity and cupidity of the public. The public is of course no different from the audience, which is obliged to laugh at itself in another role, while fearing for Coletti, not because his life is in danger but because he might lose a bet, owing to the obtuseness of his pursuers. Once again, this splits the audience, who are caught up in contradictory positions of sympathy and identification against itself.¹⁵

While *Wo ist Coletti* brings the 'externalising' mode of early cinema to its most sophisticated form of reflexivity and self-reference, *Der Mann im Keller* takes an action-genre like the detective film and extracts from it a maximum of 'interiorisation'. The story builds up a layered network of interweaving plot-lines and character-connections, much in the manner of the multi-strand narratives popular today, revealing bit by bit intricate temporal structures and various emotional complications, based on unexpected family relations. Distinctly abstract causal links are metaphorically embodied and made physically accessible with the aid of every conceivable form of connectivity, including emotional affinity, amorous desire and confusingly similar physiognomies. Likewise, spatial contiguities of the kind which fall within the experiential realm of everyday life in the modern metropolis are deployed: for example, the proverbially slavish devotion of the lap dog leads the detective to the correct house; the suspicious noises coming from next door travel along a disused gas pipe; the detective gains access to the house of the deceived fiancée by disguising himself as an electrician. These are

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allusions not only to the rapid shift from gas to electricity in private homes, but also to the cinema itself as the art of (electric) lights and flows. Stuart Webbs, significantly, uses an ultramodern torch-light to examine the cellar. Similarly, cars, the postal service, the newspaper advertisements, and especially the telephone play important roles as connective, communicative and transportation devices.¹⁶

All of this gives *Der Mann im Keller* a decidedly solid motivational framework, supported by the distinctive deployment of modern technologies, no less than by its recourse to (new-fangled) depth-psychology and (old-fashioned) melodramatic coincidence. Time and again, however, the director makes sure that the narrative moves – and Stuart Webbs' ingenuity in anticipating them – become comprehensible to the spectator, by demonstrating the hero's superior intellect and inferential logic by analogy with technical processes or by condensing cause and effect. When one of the criminals manages to free himself after Webbs has tied him up, May shows, in a series of carefully composed shots and sequences, how the crook first frees his feet in order to get closer to the burning candle, which he then uses to sear through the rope binding his hands behind his back. But May does not forget to foreground the pain this causes to the burnt wrists. Such details fuse into a tight mesh of gestures and actions, whose purpose is not only to produce 'realism' and a feeling of being up-to-date in the modern world, but to underline, and thereby synchronise, the passage of events (narrative progress) with a display of causal chains that link technical processes to human cognition and action – and vice versa: a feature in which we already recognise the fetish with gadgets in a figure like James Bond.

In other respects, too, *Der Mann im Keller* bears comparison with other international examples of the genre, showing similarities with Maurice Tourneur's early masterpiece *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1913). Shot-scales are more varied and the editing establishes a noticeably faster pace than in other German 'auteur' films from 1913–1916.¹⁷ Despite the shorter average shot-length, May and his cameraman Max Fassbender often aim for spatial depth, which they can then dramatically exploit.¹⁸ As a mark of the emerging 'classical style', key plot points are organised to create symmetries or mirror each other – a feature one critic noted with satisfaction: 'One particularly drastic moment in a highly dramatic plot occurs when Stuart Webbs uses exactly the same method on the crooks that they had attempted to use to take care of him'.¹⁹ Despite these classical (or 'international') stylistic traits, May's editing principles and the logic of space and time underpinning them, differ from the near-contemporary narrative

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patterning developed by Griffith in his Biograph films. Griffith, too, when cross-cutting—that is, connecting multiple locations, as part of a saved-in-the-nick-of-time scenario—uses the telephone (*The Lonely Villa*) or the telegraph (*The Lonedale Operator*). However, he also forges links between locations and actions separated from each other geographically without such technological connections by merely alternating between them through a direct cut (*After Many Years: Enoch Arden*). For the audience this opens up a new (and in the history of film form revolutionary) action space, of the kind that only the cinema can produce, because, strictly speaking, these connections exist solely in the mind of the spectator, by way of inference, empathy or other mental or affective actions.

It is this idea of continuity through filmic contiguity, in defiance of all spatial proximity—rather than parallel montage as such—that constitutes Griffith's most decisive contribution to the development of the long motion picture.²⁰ Joe May, by contrast, still conceives of space in such a way that locations have to be physically contiguous, if they are to generate logical relations or causal links. Hence in *Der Mann im Keller* it is critical that the key locations are two adjacent houses, providing the physical, visible basis for all the connections, coincidences and encounters, as well as motivating the doublet escape/capture of the lapdog, on which the resolution hinges. While *Der Mann im Keller* was certainly modern (though probably not unique: too few films have survived to allow for comparison), May still relies on a convention ubiquitous in early narrative cinema: space had to be preserved in its physical coherence throughout a given action, and causal links could be suggested through contiguity or shot-reverse-shot, but not through parallel editing or alternation.²¹ In this way, *Der Mann im Keller* belongs to the transitional phase in the development from so-called 'primitive' to 'classic' narrative cinema, or what—following Noel Burch—I have called the external and the interiorising mode. Yet the staging of space which May adopts, in order to convey as vividly and economically as possible a sense of continuity and purpose in the logic of actions, of move and countermove, of premise and conclusion (i.e. signalling it through proximity and contiguity of the main action spaces) indicates that—despite their bold and idiosyncratic formal features—his were still genre films, aimed at a public familiar with crime and detective films, rather than attempts to invent a new system of narrative continuity, as was the case with *Der Student von Prag*, the 'auteur' film made by Wegener, Ewers and Rye the year before.²² And yet, as this digression suggests, they have in common with each other (as indeed with French, Danish and American

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films of the period), a remarkably ‘conceptual’ or constructivist notion of time, space and agency, regardless of whether they were making ‘art’ and ‘author’ films for a niche public or genre films for the masses.

Time, Space and Causality in Fritz Lang: *Kämpfende Herzen*

My argument is thus that, between 1913 and 1921, when the cinema as a complex vehicle of modernity and modernisation consolidated its public, it was the detective film, in its European (the Danish ‘White Slave Trade’ films, Louis Feuillade’s *Fantomas* series), as well as American variants (besides Tourneur’s *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, George Loan Tucker’s *Traffic in Souls*, 1913) that emerged as the most ‘theoretical’ genre and functioned as a vanguard for testing novel and uniquely filmic articulations of time and space. It is this rich pre-war tradition that the first directorial efforts of Fritz Lang took up and developed in the direction of several more dimensions of reflexive complexity and layers of meta-cinematic commentary. Lang came to film via Joe May (and Erich Pommer), and certainly absorbed from both director and producer the salient skills of how to make detective serials and adventure films in the French and Danish manner. The two-part *Die Spinnen* (1919–20) constitutes a clear example of Lang’s aptitude in doubling the patterns of move and countermove, of sudden plot reversals and unexpected revelations, thereby adding further layers of deception and mystery to the *Fantomas*-type spy-and-adventure thriller. But the rediscovery of several of Lang’s films previously thought to have been lost (*Harakiri*, *Das wandernde Bild*, *Kämpfende Herzen/Vier um die Frau*) requires a reappraisal of his earliest phase as a director, in the years 1919–21, especially in the wider contexts of genre cinema as a possible basis for formal experiments with cinematic space, temporality and narration – features also crucial to the modernist novel.

In light of the generic problems raised so far, *Kämpfende Herzen* (1921) is particularly apposite, not least because, as Georges Sturm has shown, the film’s thematic continuity with Lang’s previous (and subsequent) works is offset by the formal departure *Kämpfende Herzen* signifies from *Die Spinnen*. In its spatial complexity and multi-layered temporality it points more to *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*, which was filmed in the same year and, in fact, directly imitates some scenes.²³ Although one might argue that *Kämpfende Herzen* is the prototype for a genre which Lang spent a lifetime making his own – the male melodrama focused around a *femme fatale* – it is also a detective film which, much like May’s *Der Mann im Keller*, displays a fascination for the mutually

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antagonistic categories of time, space and causality. The hero is not a detective in the traditional sense; rather he is a jealous husband who believes himself to be deceived by his wife. But it is precisely his double function as both deceived husband and detective investigating this deception that provides the key to all the other doublings which enable the action to conflate perpetrator, victim and detective, and so to reformulate the question of guilt, along with agency and causality. In his own way, thereby, Lang solves the most basic problem of Griffith's film form after *Intolerance*: namely, how to 'linearise' the increasingly divergent plot strands while also making them refer to one another, and how to weave them together meaningfully.

Contemporary critics were immediately struck by the interlaced plot, the several *Doppelgänger* motifs, the multiple confusions and coincidences. On 13 February 1921, *Der Kinematograph* wrote: 'One can certainly not complain about a lack of plot in this story of love and petty criminals. On the contrary, it is a mad whirl of passionate encounters, temptations and threats, secret rendezvous, burglaries and counterfeits, a farrago [. . .] to make one giddy, whilst the wildest flights of fantasy are given free rein'.²⁴ The plot was succinctly summarised in *Die Lichtbildbühne*:

Using counterfeit money, the broker Yquem buys for his adored wife an expensive item of jewellery from a den of thieves and receivers of stolen goods, which he had sought out in disguise. There he becomes aware of a man who looks identical to a mysterious picture which he had once found amongst his wife's belongings. He follows the man to an elegant hotel, where, via a letter penned in the handwriting of his wife, he invites the stranger to a rendezvous at his house. Made curious, William Krafft follows the invitation, and Yquem's house becomes the setting for a few night-time hours of frenzied, criminal events. Florence's innocence comes to light; but Meunier, Yquem's friend, is revealed as a rogue and shot; Krafft turns out to be a confidence man and even Yquem is forced to atone for his suspicious mind.²⁵

What makes *Kämpfende Herzen* a male melodrama is already signalled in its alternative title: 'Four (men) for one woman.' The complex intrigue concerns men whose indirect communications with each other are focalised around one woman. With Florence, the wife under suspicion, a homosocial network of plots and conspiracies, of betrayal, loyalty tested and deceived is built up, such as can also be found in Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and his American films (e.g. *Rancho Notorious*). The starting point and premise of the story, however, is not marked

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by a lack of information—as is the rule with a detective story—but by too much information, ambivalent and contradictory. Yquem possesses the most beautiful woman in the city, but he neglects her; he gives her expensive gifts but all the while he distrusts her; he believes that she has deceived him, while he is the one who leads a double life; he is desperate to know the truth, which is why he forges her handwriting. The putative unfaithfulness of the wife reveals itself to be a mere pretext in order to re-enact and make present the facts of an incident whose past occurrence the husband merely suspects. Thus the film operates from the outset under a repetition compulsion that is psychologically motivated by jealousy. Narratologically, however, it is determined by the way in which the paratactic contiguity of fragmentary scenes and their temporal succession must be shaped into a set of causal relations akin to a chain-reaction. Step by step (or ‘cut after cut’), these relations then become ever more complicated and intensified.

Consider the loose sequence of paratactic segments that open the film: a bar full of men in overcoats and top hats; someone points out Yquem, who enters at that moment, and describes him as the man with the most beautiful wife in the city; we see an elegant woman putting on a coat and leaving the house, in order to surprise her husband at work with a visit; on a street corner a newsboy is distributing fliers for a grand masked ball; he hands one to Yquem, who is hurrying past, and another to a young man with a beard; the paper is, in fact, a handwritten note, summoning the young man to a clandestine diamond market in Upton’s Tavern; cut to Yquem in his office, who is now holding in his hands the invitation to the sale of the diamonds and not to the masked ball. Although the young man is not expected in Upton’s Tavern, he nevertheless receives money from Upton, who thinks he recognises him as the brother of one of his clients, William Krafft. Instead of his wife, Yquem meets a fence, who hands him counterfeit money; Yquem then shuts up his office and disguises himself. Whilst Yquem puts on his false beard, the young man has his genuine beard shaved off at the barber’s, and while Yquem speeds along to Upton’s with the fake money, a thief from Upton’s Tavern steals the young man’s borrowed money. In front of the locked office and without having achieved her aim, Yquem’s wife sets out on her way home, but is alarmed when she thinks she recognises her husband on a street corner. He, in the meantime, has bought her a piece of jewellery at Upton’s, and is just about to remove his disguise in the entranceway of a house when he himself notices his wife passing by and reattaches the moustache.

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Coincidences, parallels, non-sequiturs: the scenes are neither temporally, spatially nor causally organised into (chrono)logically coherent narrative. Instead, different protagonists follow in quick succession, distinct events are strung together, leaving the spectator to conjecture both their identity and their relationships to each other.

A possible hypothesis for this hectic and confused opening is that Lang tries to set the scene for the film to deal with two crises, which at first glance have little to do with each other but which the director has his own reasons to want to interlace. First, there is the crisis of the bourgeois milieu which seems to frustrate men used to the exercise of power by denying them the possibility of directly intervening in the world around them, or of influencing its direction: agency is make-believe, causality becomes role-play, and action becomes reaction. Although the film offers no explanation for this state of affairs, it affects both rich and poor alike; as in *Dr Mabuse*, a climate of lawlessness and violence points to more than monetary inflation, the disintegration of values, and pervasive cynicism. Each situation or encounter demands dissimulation and disguise, everyone operates by means of messenger and messages, uses corrupt sellers and engages middlemen to produce effects, all this in the absence or ignorance of (real) causes.

The second crisis pertains to perception, indices and evidence; it is thus a consequence of the first. Insofar as nothing is as it seems, reality always has a double face. The answer to both of these crises is found in the figures of the conman and the detective, brought onto the scene as mirrors of each other: while the former is an expert in giving out false signals, sliding between social strata and masking contexts, the latter is an expert in reading these clues, in interpreting signs and in uncovering connections, while staying on the margins, if not outside of society and the law.

What happens, though, when the detective is not exterior to events but is himself mired in them? Such is the case of Yquem, who discovers at Upton's a man, whom he believes to be a secret admirer of his wife's, as evidenced by the photograph on the suspected love token. Jealous suspicion turns him into a detective, yet because, as the audience already knows, he is mistaken in his assumption, his moves and countermoves are so many steps in the wrong direction. They unleash consequences and form a vicious circle that brings to light his own guilt instead of that of his wife. Seen from Yquem's perspective, he is building a spider's web in which to trap his wife. Simultaneously sitting at its centre and circling its periphery, he wants to keep hold of all the threads, but is himself trapped by them. His wife, on the other hand, is at once the victim of this fabric(ation) of

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male self-deception and double-dealing, and also the negative centre of a knowledge differential among the characters, and between the characters and the audience, which makes her *fatale*, by virtue of her very innocence. At the same time, this innocence becomes poignant only insofar as we come to see it against the foil of a secret whose traumatic features are themselves the hidden springs of a repetition compulsion: wanting to recount her story to a friend, she breaks off, starts all over again, and is then interrupted by a new arrival. Yet the power relations between the male and female protagonists are considerably more enigmatic than even this complicated constellation suggests. They play out on multiple temporal planes which backtrack and criss-cross to confound any linear chronology, and yet they are built up within a remarkably confined narrative space that quite consistently generates situations that mirror, duplicate and contradict themselves until the final resolution.

In order to appreciate the pressure that obliges Lang to adhere to the formal conditions of this basic structure (i.e. the idea that limited locations can generate multiple permutations), we once more have to recall Griffith's method. Although he had only two genuine admirers in German cinema, namely Lang and Murnau, his influence, thanks to their work, is immense: their praxis of parallel montage, alternating cuts and the contrastive use of action-spaces is both inspired by Griffith and deviates sharply from the master. Lang and Murnau are studies in contrasts when we consider how individualised, reflexive and highly differentiated were their respective appropriations of the lessons of the director of *Intolerance* (made in 1916, but not released in Germany until 1920) in. For instance, Murnau – like Griffith – used alternation as a bridging element between two scenes that were spatially separated but temporally linked. Lang's *mise-en-scène* adds a further dimension to this, however, by conveying an impression of continuity through contiguity, and in so doing achieves a considerably more elegant solution to the problem of how to wrong-foot an audience without losing it by too much confusion than earlier practitioners of the detective films, such as May's *Der Mann im Keller*. There, causal relations were concatenated at the expense of spatial contiguity, whilst in Lang's case we learn that the alternating cut never brings two spaces together causally, not even between two adjacent locations. On the contrary, their repetition simply highlights their differences. Equally important is the fact that the creation of paratactic sequences or contrastive oppositions is thus transformed into a hierarchy, where the spaces nest inside one another in the manner of a Russian doll. Because in Lang's films the ultimate significance of a space is always

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kept under wraps for as long as possible, like the many doors in *Kämpfende Herzen* which all require two turns of the key, scenes must also repeat themselves—make a double turn—before their meaning can be unlocked. Hence the denouement between Yquem and William Krafft plays out in front of a locked parlour door, repeating exactly (but with a spatial and temporal difference) the evening of the engagement, when Yquem stood before the locked bedroom door behind which Florence and Werner Krafft were hiding.

As to the importance of the action-spaces concerned, their initial proliferation inexorably gives way to a hierarchical order and spiralling dynamic that draws everything towards Yquem and Florence's house. But this domestic space is itself merely the external shell, housing another space, that of Florence towards whom all the action flows, but whose centre is the still-point of a double void and vortex: her (locked) room containing her (unconscious) body. Yet this climactic intensification of focus and locus is achieved through strict alternation. One could in fact speak of a kind of 'serial' alternation, in the sense that multiple plot strands are seemingly being followed in parallel when they are in reality interlocking. This occurs because the locations, which at first appear to follow one another in a temporal sequence, are connected via a principle which, following Gérard Legrand, I would like to call the interlocking 'clockwork' logic (*l'engrenage*) of Lang's causality.²⁶ By this I mean that each step that drives the action forwards links it simultaneously backwards to what has gone before, and that thanks to the repetition of these newly (re)coded action-spaces, the viewer is obliged to revise his or her understanding of events up to that point. The action escalates or relaxes in a stepwise fashion, which complicates the relationship between the individual plot segments, intensifying their inner relationship while slackening their manifest link to one another, and thus continually reminding the viewer that if s/he wants to follow the logic of events, s/he must forge connections between them on an abstract conceptual level. There are many striking examples in Lang's later films of this same procedure, such as the scene in *Metropolis* in which Fredersen, the ruler of the city, visits the inventor Rotwang in order to learn about the catacombs, while, at that exact moment, his son Freder follows the workers down into the very same catacombs. Here, the symbolic device of the steps becomes concretised into the descent of the workers into the catacombs, intercut with Fredersen checking his watch and determining to visit Rotwang; moreover, both segments are framed by a scene in which Freder allows himself to be pinned as if to a cross by the famous-infamous heart machine.

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After this detour through the temporality of Lang's action-spaces, let us return to *Kämpfende Herzen* and observe its spatio-temporal separation and subsequent interlacing in more detail. The film begins with a clear topographical division and social differentiation of the action-spaces: the City Hotel exudes luxury just as Upton's gin palace reeks of sordid criminality, while Yquem's office is as dark and secretive as his and his wife's Tiergarten villa is light and airy; all four are linked by the street corner, the nodal point in this set of coordinates. Yet the parallels being drawn here so pointedly cancel out these social contrasts, so that the normal functions of the eye (to provide orientation) and of the mind (to confer a sense of order) become sucked into a maelstrom (which spontaneously and powerfully evokes a feeling of dizziness).

In this regard, *Kämpfende Herzen* is the blueprint for many of Lang's crime films. In fact, his last American film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, in which the rich publisher, played by Dana Andrews, attempts to conceal having committed murder by turning amateur detective himself, is in the vein of a remake of *Kämpfende Herzen*. In both films Lang problematises fundamental ideas about the detective genre (by giving them an Oedipal twist – in Sophocles' sense rather than Freud's). All symbols are doubly coded or repeated while being displaced in time and space, so that doubt is cast on the very idea of evidence and proof.²⁷ To name a few examples from *Kämpfende Herzen*: the newsboy gives Krafft a secret message, which in the next scene we also see in Yquem's hands; Yquem is sitting in the hotel, watching William Krafft, while in a parallel action, the thief watches Krafft's twin brother Werner at the barber's; Werner looks for his brother William at the City Hotel but misses him, because in the meantime William is paying a visit to Upton's Tavern, which Werner has just left. During supper at the hotel, William swaps a genuine diamond ring for a fake one, whilst in the Tavern Yquem is using fake money to buy a genuine diamond. Yquem is a broker and frequents the stock exchange, but he seems to be really at home trading in stolen goods. Everything rhymes with something else, everything has its counterpart, and yet these relationships slip out of any neat correspondence, as the contrasts become misaligned and the parallels disappear into infinity.

In many ways Lang took his method from Griffith's parallel montage, emphasising to the point of pastiche the latter's division of the action into short segments, whose repetition and variation promises rationality, clarity and closure. In Lang's case, however, these suggest complex causal relationships principally through the apparent

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lack of connective elements: the puzzled or spellbound audience fall as if into a conceptual void, obliged as they are to constantly revise their judgements and assumptions, if they are not to lose their footing entirely. Put differently, Lang's short takes in this film are often like scraps of paper, which make no sense on their own and only seem to yield their secret when pieced together, as a detective might piece together the scraps in a suspect's wastepaper basket. It becomes the structuring metaphor of *Kämpfende Herzen*: the complete image only emerges once the connections between the various fragments and segments become known. But it is only by understanding this image as itself a visual puzzle or rebus picture that the design underwriting the action becomes legible.

This is because, even here, Lang gives the process one further, decisive twist: the messages, signs and indices relayed and circulated are not merely incomplete, and hence mysterious; they are inherently ambiguous, misleading, and even intentionally false. From the very first images, Lang presents in *Kämpfende Herzen* a world founded on the lies of its messengers and the unreliability of its messages. The blind beggar on the street corner can suddenly see when a dog cocks its leg over his hat on the ground. The newsboy is greatly pleased at having caught out the imposter, but is himself wrong about the identity of William Krafft, whom he mistakes for Werner, telling him the location of the secret rendezvous. The banknotes that Yquem has delivered to his office are forgeries, as is the handwriting on the letter which he gives to William. The ring belonging to Florence's friend is replaced with a copy, but the woman who was cheated in this way has herself just cheated on her partner with another man, before she realises the identity of the petty criminal and imposter who has conned her. Yquem's friend Meunier is a cheat, because he blackmails Florence, and even the otherwise honourable William Krafft deals falsely when he camouflages his secret tryst with Florence as a burglary – ostensibly to protect her future marriage, but with the result that the beloved woman comes under suspicion herself.

In these circumstances, there is no way the various scenes, circulating separately or forcibly separated, can be fitted into a seamless whole: means and media, messages and messengers are at all points poised to be confused with their double or spitting image; in this way the otherwise hoary motif of the twin brothers assumes its emblematic function, elevating – as so often happens in later Lang – a clichéd melodramatic set-piece into an almost ontological principle. The meeting between William Krafft and Florence will serve here as an example: William has come to the rendezvous because he believes

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that Florence asked him to by letter. But because the letter was faked by Yquem, she is not expecting William. Rather, she yearns for Werner, and for a brief moment—but long enough to betray her innermost desire—she mistakes William for him. A double deceit reveals a (hidden) truth.

As in Jacques Lacan's essay on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, the letter, even if it is a forgery, does indeed find its true recipient, who turns out to be not the addressee but the author. What applies to Florence's (involuntary) authorship is even more the case with Harry Yquem. Whilst Florence, when she catches sight of William, is genuinely surprised by the strength of her own feelings for Werner, when Yquem comes home, he merely feigns surprise at discovering his wife with her supposed lover. Rather than addressing the man he takes to be his rival and the wife he takes to be unfaithful, he directs the letter to himself, since he alone is responsible for the *mise-en-scène* of the rendezvous he pretends to have uncovered. It is, therefore, Yquem who closes the circuit, because the meaning of this self-addressed letter lies in the fact that, with it, he assures himself of his subjectivity—his anxieties, his guilt, and his jealousy—while condemning himself out of his own mouth. As in Attic tragedy, the detective becomes the perpetrator, or, as the common saying has it: eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves. Thus the message was neither directed to Florence nor to us, the audience. But even here matters are made more complicated if one pays attention to what Yquem wants to say in his confession. By addressing the letter at once to Florence and not to her, Yquem's story (as is so often the case with Lang) revolves around a black hole, around an absent thing which nevertheless emits considerable semiotic and narrative (i.e. negative) energy, without incontrovertible basis in truth or material substance.

The game of increasingly existential make-believe goes back and forth until not only the action-spaces interlock, but through them the protagonists. So fatefully are they woven together by the end that the Yquems' villa takes on the shape of an origami figure, 'folded' in space (around Florence's bedroom) and 'suspended' in the past (the moment of the secret rendezvous). Lang's involuted narrative, rather than a personal quirk and the director's 'signature' might, therefore, be more usefully read across the categories of trauma, specifically with reference to repetition compulsion, the sudden breaking off of the plot-lines and the interlacing of the various narrative perspectives through flashbacks, which twice stop outside the bedroom door as if it were the threshold of a 'primal scene'. When considering *Kämpfende*

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Herzen in this way, it becomes less a detective film, constructed around Yquem and impelled by his jealousy, and more centred around Florence, tracing the genesis of her mental states and following a (psycho)therapeutic logic. The final tableau reinforces this possibility: once again, we see her lying outstretched on the divan, this time not woken from unconsciousness, but hit by a pistol shot. She plights her troth to Yquem once more and asks him, because of the guilt he has incurred (including towards her), to submit to just punishment. A happy ending, according to the genre's melodramatic scheme, is complicated by the fact that it is the investigation itself that produces the crime which it is supposed to expose, and then doubled by the knowledge that hidden in the deception, there is truth, after all. For if we recall the newsboy and his flier, this piece of paper emerges not as a 'decoy' for the real message (the rendezvous at Upton's), but as the true, secret message: the masked ball in the Blue Hall is in fact taking place in the front room of the Yquems' villa, and the lifting of the masks at midnight is the denouement in the conservatory. What starts out as a feint becomes a prophecy, and the film's happy ending re-writes itself once more in the light of what has preceded it, rather than because of what the audience imagines might follow.

In *Kämpfende Herzen*, as in almost all of Fritz Lang's films, the frame that could serve to contain the contradictions, disambiguate them and restore order, is nonetheless missing. At the end—anticipating the dynamics of *M*, Lang's most famous crime film—both police and the underworld converge on the Yquems' house, storm the villa and break into the conservatory. Here, too, there is a parallel between the representatives of the powers that be and those who reject or subvert the law. But as in *M*, the formula does not quite hold, nor can the audience neatly sort, sift and classify the motley crew of comen and simpletons, of the innocent and the guilty, of dark schemers like Yquem and cowards like Meunier.

What makes the film such a monument to modernism is its entirely unique way of making time a function of space and vice versa: as we saw, the action moves inexorably to one single location, the villa, but this location is itself designed hierarchically and divided topographically. And the main reason it is cut up and segmented in this way is because it has to accommodate a very particular temporality: that of memory and trauma, of seriality and anticipation, but conjugated in a mode that is regulated by the need to repeat, and to repeat exactly. The film, in other words, both acknowledges something like Einstein's theory of relativity, and tries to shore itself up against the ruin and trauma caused by the shock of its implications.

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Lang's peculiar narration seems to be aimed at preserving time's arrow and our lives' inevitable irreversibility, while contemplating the possibility of an endless *mise-en-abyme*, without foregoing the knowledge that actions have consequences and narratives move towards a conclusion. This need to reach a resolution, inherent in the detective genre, does not, it seems to me, entirely vitiate the desire, typical of melodrama, to undo what has already happened, in the mode of the 'if only': the form of regret and forgiveness that is the wellspring of tears, after the 'death of tragedy'. In this respect, the use of the *Doppelgänger* motif and the many mirroring devices achieve a double codification, which not only holds the action in balance but in suspension. In *Kämpfende Herzen*, the situation, provoked by Harry Yquem when he feigns surprise at the discovery of his wife with William Krafft, represents the exact and symmetrical re-enactment of the original (or primal) scene between Florence and Werner. Nevertheless, the genius of Lang is that we need not read this re-enactment in Freudian terms (as the repetition of a trauma in order to overcome it), or in Aristotelian terms (as catharsis and purification). We might equally remember Marx's dictum, when he spoke of repetition in history: first as tragedy, then as farce.

In the final tableau of *Kämpfende Herzen* it is now William who opens the door to Florence's room and tells Henry Yquem that she wants nothing more from him, thereby exactly responding to the hope which his contrite anticipation expects. At the same time, this rebus-story of a resurrected marriage implies several kinds of deferred actions, in the spirit of Dostoevsky, Poe or Kafka, where so often the punishment is in search of its crime, banality is in search of its secret, comedy is in search of its tragedy.

Perhaps it now becomes clearer why I believe that the detective film, when combined with the structures and dynamics of melodrama, typifies early German cinema (and its contribution to international cinema) more accurately than fantasy, horror and Expressionism. Even *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* should perhaps be seen as an example of the detective genre, complicated by a uniquely German penchant for the melodrama of deferred action. To that end, time had to be spatialised, and space made a function of both past and future—a feature once thought a fatal weakness of German cinema of the Weimar period, when compared to the breathless linearity of Hollywood, but now recognised as that which made this cinema truly modern—then and now.

Translated from the German by Stephen Joy and the author

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Notes

1. This article was originally published as Chapter VIII in my own book: Thomas Elsaesser, 'Zeit, Raum und Kausalität: Joe May, Fritz Lang und der deutsche Detektivfilm', in Thomas Elsaesser, *Filmgeschichte und Frühes Kino* (Munich: edition text+kritik, 2002), pp. 224–49.
2. For a comparison of Hollywood and the German film industry, see Thomas Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Kristin Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005). For a study of the continuities and breaks between pre- and post-1918 German cinema, see Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996).
3. See the essays on Hofer's films (Wedel, Dagrada, Tsivian) and on Max Mack's (Wedel, Kasten) in T. Elsaesser (ed.), *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996).
4. For a detailed discussion, see Thomas Elsaesser, *Das Weimarer Kino – aufgeklärt und doppelbödig* (Berlin Vorwerk 8, 1999), pp. 57–66.
5. *Die Nibelungen*, for example, was first shown without the last act, because Lang did not finish the montage on time; the budget spent on press and cinema advertising was so enormous, however, that the premiere could not be postponed. Ufa and other German production companies seem to have put up with the risks from their creative staff in order to develop prototypes and to encourage experimentation.
6. On the subject of intertitles in German film, see Leonardo Quaresima, 'Zur Problematik des titellosen Films', in *Cinema & Cie*, no 1, 2001.
7. See ch. 3 'Wie der frühe Film...' and ch. 6 'Betörende Töne' in Thomas Elsaesser, *Filmgeschichte und Frühes Kino* (Munich: text+kritik, 2002).
8. D. Sannwald (ed.), *Rot für Gefahr; Feuer und Liebe* (Berlin: Henschel, 1995), p. 52.
9. Ibid.
10. See Thomas Elsaesser, *Das Weimarer Kino, aufgeklärt und doppelbödig* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1999), pp. 57–87.
11. See Hans Michael Bock and Claudia Lenssen (eds), *Joe May – Regisseur und Produzent* (Munich: text+kritik, 1991).
12. See also my article on Bolten-Baeckers' *Die Hand der Gerechtigkeit* in Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli (eds), *Before Caligari* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).
13. 'Der Vater des Detektivfilms: Ein Interview mit Ernst Reicher', in which Reicher continually reiterates that in his detective films the 'how' is more important than the 'why'. *Ernst Reicher Mappe*, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.
14. See Michael Wedel, *Max Mack Showman im Glashauss* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1994). By way of contextualisation and comparison of the Stuart Webbs films, one could also look at Joseph Delmont's *Das Recht auf Dasein* (1913), or Franz Hofer's *Die Schwarze Natter* (1913). See Heide Schlüppmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks* (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1990).
15. The spectator is also offered an interesting tourist trip around Berlin (along with a visit to the cinema), which points to the struggle of the feature film to incorporate the 'cinema of attractions' during this transitional period.
16. The fact that *Der Mann im Keller* is not an isolated example is borne out by stills from *Das Panzergewölbe*, where the most modern electric alarm clocks and relay switches

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construct the dramatic climax. This obsession with modern gadgets in the Stuart Webbs series appears to have reached its most impressive form in *Der Geistespuk*, where an intruder who appears only at night is caught and identified by the flash of a special camera when he tampers with a writing table that is linked to the shutter release.

17. Curt Riess, among others (e.g. Bardeche/Brasillach), has shown that both the choice of genre and also the names of the heroes and locations are not simply hallmarks of the 'nationalistic' productions of the pre-war years, and even during the First World War itself (cf. 'Alles geht weiter' in *Das gab's nur einmal*, p. 45). But note also: 'detective films present the opponents of the cinema with material for their campaign against the light-show theatres [...] "English" and "sensation" are terms which our opponents would clutch at, were it not for the fact that everything in and about this film [*Der Mann im Keller*] is genuinely German, and that "sensational" is not a reference to its quality' (*Der Kinematograph*, No. 379, 1914).
18. For example, in the scene where Stuart Webbs is playing an electrician. See also a still photograph from *Das Panzergewölbe* in Hans Michael Bock (ed.), *Paul Leni* (Deutsches Filmmuseum: Frankfurt, 1986), p. 246.
19. *Ernst Reicher Mappe* (Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin). Although this review in fact refers to Stuart Webbs's sixteenth outing in *Die Pagode*, it applies equally well to the trick with the suitcases in *Der Mann im Keller*.
20. See Tom Gunning, 'Weaving a Narrative', in T. Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 336–47.
21. In this context, an important source is to be found in the review of an unfortunately lost film, *Heimat und Fremde* (1913): 'An interesting innovation which achieves strong effects is the simultaneous projection of two scenes alongside one another' (*Berliner Börsen-Courier*, August 1913).
22. See Leon Hunt, 'The Student of Prague: Division and Codification of Space', in T. Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990).
23. Georges Sturm, *Die Circe der Pfau und das Halbblut* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2001), pp. 180–7.
24. Quoted in Sturm, *Die Circe der Pfau*, p. 181.
25. *Die Lichtbildbühne*, no. 6, 5 February 1921. Quoted in Sturm, *Die Circe der Pfau*, p. 180.
26. Gérard Legrand, 'Nouvelles notes pour un éloge de Fritz Lang', *Positif*, 94, April 1968, pp. 1–7.
27. Georges Sturm has, on the contrary, put forward evidence that *Scarlet Street* is the remake of *Kämpfende Herzen*. See Sturm, *Die Circe der Pfau*, pp. 190–216. In so doing, he confirms that this almost unknown early film of Lang's is of key importance for the director's entire *oeuvre*. It is all the more remarkable that neither Patrick McGilligan nor Tom Gunning even mention *Kämpfende Herzen*.